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Marching through hell :: the British soldier in the First World War's East African campaign/

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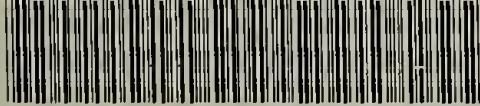
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MARCHING THROUGH HELL
THE BRITISH SOLDIER IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR'S
EAST AFRICAN CAMPAIGN

A Thesis Presented

by

TAYLOR HARPER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 1995

HISTORY

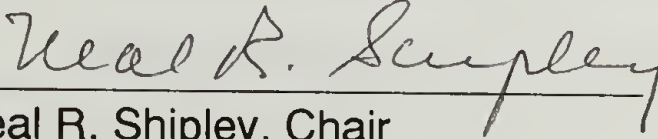
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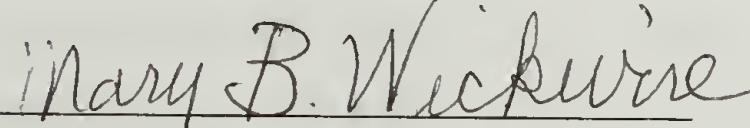
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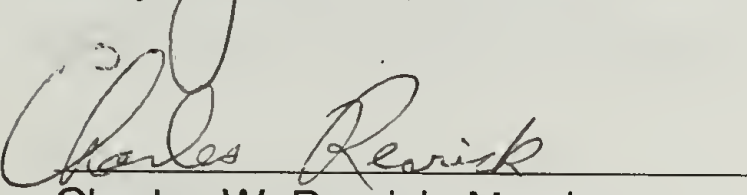
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PREFACE

Though the date 22nd of August, 1914, 17 days after Britain declared war on Germany, is memorialized as the first incident of hostilities between the British and the Germans, the fact is that the first bullet fired at the enemy by a soldier wearing a British uniform occurred a week earlier in Togoland, West Africa. The soldier was a black African, unknown and unremembered. Many people today do not even realize that war raged across large portions of Africa during World War I. Some of these campaigns were brief and unremarkable, others, such as the one in East Africa, lasted for four bloody years. On November 12th, 1918, the several thousand strong German forces under General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck fought their last engagement against the British and on November 13th, finally learned of the Armistice that had been signed two days previously. These were also the last bullets of the war to be fired.

To Africa, and especially to East Africa, the Great War was no small affair. Approximately 60 – 65 % of the populations of Europeans, comprised mostly of young men, in British East Africa and German East Africa served in the armed forces. To German East Africa, today's Tanzania, where the war was fought, plantations, farms and villages were wiped out, famine and drought killed thousands, the infrastructure crumbled, and the Spanish influenza, like a backhanded slap, swept through the country after the war had already wreaked so much damage. On the German side the vast bulk of soldiers who fought in the war were in G.E.A. when the war began. However, in accordance with Lettow–

Vorbeck's grand strategy, thousands of British soldiers were brought from abroad, soldiers who might have fought in France or Belgium. By far the largest group of soldiers who fought in Africa were Africans. Over two hundred thousand served as carriers or askaris for the British. After the war they returned to their indigenous groups changed men, many of them realizing for the first time that the "white man" was not invincible.

But this is the story of the British soldier serving in Africa, especially those coming directly from England, the motor transporters, doctors, Royal Fusiliers, and Royal Lancashires. These men were leaving the damp, temperate climate and the lush, green valleys of England for a world as foreign to them as if they had left the planet. Not only were many of these troops entering the military world for the first time they were also newly encountering the African tropics which had only begun to be explored by Europeans half a century earlier. These soldiers were not explorers, they were not thrill-seekers looking for the latest adventures. They were for the most part simple working Englishman who had answered Kitchner's call to arms in defense of their country. However, they little expected to be sent into the depths of Africa to defend it.

Relying on letters, memoirs, and diaries from the Imperial War Museum the Rhodes House Library at Oxford, and Kew Public Records Office, as well as several published memoirs, I have tried to describe the experiences these soldiers might encounter fighting the elusive Lettow-Vorbeck and his trained German and askaris forces in Africa and how they felt about them.

The conditions described here and the experiences these men faced were of course also encountered by the other troops involved in this polyglot army. There were European settlers from British East Africa.

These settlers had come from Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Holland and South Africa. There were also soldiers brought directly from South Africa, India, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone; Belgians fought with the Congo forces, British with the Rhodesian, Portuguese from Mozambique fought with their forces and, of course, Africans who fought for everyone. Unfortunately the Africans' story is the least known and most poorly recorded, though I hope through accounts of the British to shed some light on what they faced as well.

My goal in writing this was to discover, if possible, how a large group of Englishmen, brought to Africa not by their own design, reacted to this new and very strange setting, culture, and type of warfare. Fighting in Africa was nothing like life in the trenches. And yet few would say it was any easier. It was a different kind of hell. A mobile hell. It was not the psychological hell of sitting in bunkers being bombed to smithereens, but rather the psychological hell of marching for days with little food and bad water with the possibility at any moment of ambush in the dense bush by German troops, rhino, lion, or leopard. There was no barbed wire, only thorn-studded bushes that could shred your clothes in a minute and that stretched out to the horizon. As in the trenches there were rats, but also snakes, vermin of a dozen different types, biting ants, stinging bees, jiggers, and a myriad of microscopic organisms that took a greater toll of these fresh men from Britain than bullets or shells. War is always hell. Only the setting changes. The men who went to East Africa instead of France were not being given choice assignments by any means. The

sentiments are best expressed in a common soldier's lyric:

"Ah, I wish to hell I was in France!
There one lives like a gentleman and dies like a man,
here one lives like a pig and dies like a dog."¹

¹Cited in Byron Farwell, *The Great War in East Africa* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), p. 294.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The size of Africa is always difficult to grasp especially with its artificially shrunken size on most of today's maps. One rarely realizes that it comprises 20% of all the world's land and is only a third smaller than Asia. German East Africa, now Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, could swallow Germany and France and still have some room for dessert, say Luxemburg or Belgium. British East Africa, now Kenya, and Uganda were more than three times the size of the British Isles. Defending or invading such vast areas was an enormous task.

Hanging from the Equator, German East Africa was a land of contrasts. From its lush tropical beaches to year-round snows. From the fertile lands of its northern plateaus to huge expanses of arid bush. From its volcanoes to its swamps. It had everything beautiful and horrible that an African country could offer. With Africa's tallest mountain, Mt. Kilimanjaro, bordering on Africa's longest and deepest lake, Tanganyika, and its largest lake, Victoria, as well as having the world's largest caldera, Ngorongoro Crater, G.E.A. was a country of superlatives. Only a narrow strip of coast along the Indian Ocean lay beneath 600 feet in elevation including a larger swampland area around the Rufiji River, while a third of the country is comprised of high plateaus. The East African Rift Valley cuts through these plateaus in a north-south direction along a western branch, creating Lake Tanganyika and Rukwa, while an eastern branch slices the country in half from Kenya to Lake Nyasa.

The proximity of G.E.A. to the equator regulated its climate, creating monthly variations in temperature of no more than 9 degrees F. Elevation created far greater fluctuations in temperature than did seasons. While a soldier might be burning up and dying of thirst on the Massai Steppe under the tropical sun, that same soldier could look up at the snow capped peak of Mt. Kilimanjaro and dream of arctic climes. Though most of G.E.A. got very little rain throughout the year, about 30 inches inland, more on the coast, it came all at once during the rainy seasons, bringing to a halt all military movement for the space of a few months.

Because of its historically low population density, G.E.A. was the home to a rich and wide variety of wildlife. Immense herds of wildebeest travelled across the great grass plains, such as the Serengeti, accompanied by zebra, giraffe, buffalo, gazelle, eland, dik-dik and kudu. These herds would supply much needed food to the poorly supplied British and German troops, at the same time decimating some populations. Predators to these herds and occasionally to the soldiers included hyenas, wild dogs, lions, leopards, and cheetahs. Rhinos, though not predators, could often pose a serious threat to columns of troops. Elephants trampled the plains, forests, and when attacked, the soldiers. Crocodiles and hippopotamuses lurked in rivers and swamps. The docile looking hippo has been known to attack small boats and crush them between its massive jaws.

But the dangerous animals living in Tanzania did not limit human settlement, rather it was the dreaded tsetse fly that thrived on wild game in miombo woodlands and are the carriers of *Trypanosoma*, one of Africa's many deadly parasites. *Trypanosoma* is a blood parasite that causes sleeping sickness in cattle and people. Because of these factors there

were only eight million Africans living in this very large country at the time of World War I and only 5,000 German settlers. The Europeans congregated in Dar es Salaam, Tanga and the fertile highlands around Mt. Kilimanjaro. The British possessions were populated at the time by nearly seven million people, but only 6,000 Europeans.

At the first signs of war in the summer of 1914, the inhabitants of East Africa wondered anxiously whether or not they would be drawn into the conflict. Many, fearing the destruction and bother of armed conflict, favoured maintaining a neutral position. In 1885 at the Berlin West Africa Conference the major European countries had met to decide the fate of the Congo River basin. In the Congo Act that was passed the issue of the neutrality of African countries in the case of war between two or more of the great powers was dealt with. It was decided that African colonies would all remain neutral, provided everyone agreed. Dr. Heinrich Schnee, governor of G.E.A, who spent much of his time in Africa building a prosperous colony did not want to see his work fall down around him under the hammer of war. The British government would have been happy to see East Africa remain neutral, provided, of course, she strictly followed the restrictions of a neutral nation. That is, no safe harbor to warships. The presence of the German light cruiser *Konigsberg* in the harbor of Dar es Salaam was not a good omen, and German naval and military authorities had no intention of letting G.E.A. be designated a neutral power. Governor Schnee nonetheless proceeded with his negotiations to come to some peaceful accord with the British, until military events swept over the proceedings like a tidal wave.

For strategic reasons Britain felt it was too dangerous to leave G.E.A. in German hands. Because of the country's proximity to the Red

Sea and the shipping lines that passed through on their way from India to Britain, and because of its many excellent harbors and river deltas, G.E.A. had to be secured if it was not to remain neutral. Also, with all cables being cut off by Britain, German colonies and ships of war had to rely on short wave radio towers. Two of these were in G.E.A., one in Dar Es Salaam and one at Bukoba, a town on the shores of Lake Victoria. These towers could relay instructions between German warships in the Indian Ocean and Germany. As if to punctuate the danger G.E.A. posed to the British Empire, the *Konigsberg* sailed out of the harbor at Dar es Salaam on July 31st, commanded by Captain Loof, whose war time orders were to raid enemy merchant shipping. By August 1st the *Konigsberg* was off Aden, well placed to destroy any ships going through the Suez canal.

On August 7th the British cruisers *Astraea* and *Pegasus* steamed into the shipping roads of Dar es Salaam looking for the *Konigsberg*. The British Admiralty, unaware of the negotiations with Dr. Schnee regarding neutrality, considered G.E.A. a colony at war with the empire. When the *Konigsberg* was not found the cruisers proceeded to shell the radio towers. Dr. Schnee, who was apparently only too happy to help, ordered a demolition team up to the radio tower to blow it up. At the request of the British he then surrendered the town and immediately departed for an inland destination. When he passed through Pugu, twenty miles from the coast, he didn't even bother to contact Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, commander of the German forces in G.E.A.

In August 1914, Lettow-Vorbeck was forty-four. He was a handsome man with sparkling blue eyes and close-cropped brown hair. In uniform, wearing his safari hat, he might have even been considered dashing. Romance aside, he was to the core a military man. Coming from

a Prussian military family, his father had been a German general. He was on the fast track to that post himself, and his past experiences could not have prepared him better for his future assignment. These included: General Staff, regular army, regimental officer in Southwest Africa fighting the Herreros, and an assignment in Shanghai during the Boxer Rebellion. But above all he was a true leader who inspired confidence and comradeship in his troops. He had been sent to German East Africa to whip the troops into shape. By August he had only been at his task a few months and was in command of only 216 European officers and N.C.O.'s and 2,450 askaris. But mentally he was prepared, and the last thing he wanted to do was sit by while the colony was given away.

Soon after Dar es Salaam was bombed he and a portion of his command were headed to its rescue. By the time he arrived, however, the cruisers were steaming out to sea, regarding Dar es Salaam as no longer a threat and continuing their search for the *Konigsberg*. Despite Governor Schnee's directive not to interfere or break G.E.A.'s neutral status, Lettow-Vorbeck was anxious to attack. As a loyal German he felt it was his duty to cause the British as much trouble in East Africa as possible.

From the day *Astraea* and *Pegasus* shelled Dar es Salaam G.E.A. was effectively cut off from the outside world. Because the British Empire had control of the seas and could easily blockade Germany, it would be impossible for G.E.A. to bring in reinforcements and munitions, or send either to the motherland. However, Lettow-Vorbeck reasoned, the British could pull the last fit askari out of East Africa to support its forces in Europe, if, and only if, G.E.A. remained neutral or was quickly captured by the British. Therefore, Lettow-Vorbeck's objective from the beginning was

to tie up as many British forces as possible for as long as possible, thereby denying the European front of their assistance.

Though the British and German forces at the beginning of the war were roughly equal in size, because of Lettow-Vorbeck's anxiousness to draw in troops to the East African theater, he attacked first. The German troops' initial objective was to attack and destroy the railway running from Mombasa (B.E.A.'s main port) to Nairobi (the capital and economic center of B.E.A.). Lettow-Vorbeck led a flying column up the coast towards Mombasa but was stopped by a scratch force of Arabs twenty-five miles from the port. The British frontier town of Taveta near Mt. Kilimanjaro was captured by the Germans and much of the German forces were concentrated in the highlands of this area. From here patrols were constantly sent across the border to harass troops, destroy the railway and disrupt the lines of communication running from the coast inland.

To counter this threat the British called in two expeditionary forces from India. The first contingent, force "C", comprised of approximately 800 regular Indian soldiers with British officers arrived in Mombasa at the end of August and promptly was sent up country to help secure the border. The larger group, force "B", consisting of 8,000 troops arrived at the end of October, 1914, and was sent immediately by transport to the northern German East African port town of Tanga. A railway ran from Tanga on the coast to Moshi at the foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro. A two pronged attack was planned with a smaller British force attacking around the northern slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro and taking the railway terminus while Force "B" landed at Tanga. Because of delays at Tanga Lettow Vorbeck was able to transport a large portion of his forces stationed near Moshi to Tanga and repel the landing parties. Entrenched machine gun nests inflicted severe casualties

on the Indian troops. By the end of two days fighting force "B" had suffered nearly a thousand casualties. They decided to disembark, leaving ashore 16 machine guns, 455 rifles and 600,000 rounds of ammunition -- a God-send for the poorly supplied Germans. This setback ceased all British offensive action on the front until 1916 when the arrival of General Smuts and his South African troops would again give the British enough confidence to venture south through the inhospitable African bush.

At sea, with the *Konigsberg* at large in the Indian Ocean, no allied ship was safe. Most freighters stayed in safe ports under the protection of heavy guns. On August 6th the *Konigsberg* captured the *City of Winchester*, the first British merchant ship to be taken in the war. Not long afterwards, the *Konigsberg* caught the *Pegasus* alone in the Zanzibar harbor and promptly fired over 200 rounds into the much smaller ship, inflicting 86 casualties without suffering even one. On her way out of the harbor the *Konigsberg* landed three hits on the *Helmut*, a picket ship that had supposedly been guarding the harbor. The *Helmut* exploded into flame and the *Konigsberg* steamed on. Sooner after, boiler troubles forced the *Konigsberg* to seek shelter in the Rufiji river delta, the safest place on the African coast. In December, 1914, she was discovered, and in July, 1915, she was destroyed by the combined efforts of cruisers, aircraft and two monitors brought all the way from Britain. Yet her guns, which were flung overboard before capture and later salvaged by divers, continued to assist the German forces as field guns.

After a force of 6,000 British and South African troops were repulsed by 1,250 well-entrenched German forces at Salaita Hill in an attempt to retake Taveta in February, 1916, Smuts took command and began to turn the tide of British defeats. His first objective was to take the Mt. Kilimanjaro

area. The mountain, a gift from Queen Victoria to the Kaiser William II, was now being taken back at great cost. In an attempt to surround Lettow–Vorbeck's forces concentrated there, Smuts devised a pincer movement involving two columns of troops attacking around either side of the mountain and meeting again on the other side. The five days of fighting that ensued captured the mountain but not Lettow–Vorbeck and his men. They skillfully retreated south into the Usumbra hills.

Lettow–Vorbeck's retreat at Kilimanjaro was just the beginning of one of the longest retreats in the history of warfare. Eventually over the next two and a half years the Germans would retreat over 3000 miles. Only in Africa would there have been enough open wilderness to pull off such a maneuver. Lettow–Vorbeck knew the terrain as well as anyone. Much of it, in fact, was unexplored and very little of the terrain covered was properly mapped out. It was a mad dash off into the unknown, and in such a situation Lettow–Vorbeck knew he held the advantage.

In January 1917 Lettow–Vorbeck had been pushed back to the Rufiji River. Smuts had assumed Lettow–Vorbeck was interested in defending the colony, but all Lettow–Vorbeck wanted was for Smuts and his forces to continue pursuing him. His style of retreat, to carefully pick the most advantageous location from which to delay the British advance, was very costly to the British. By the beginning of 1917 Smuts had conquered two-thirds of G.E.A. In January as Smuts troops pressed from three sides, north, west and east on Lettow–Vorbeck's forces, the commander of the British forces was called away before he could see the final end to his elusive enemy. Leaving East Africa with the assurance that the campaign there would soon be over, he was to miss Lettow–Vorbeck's masterful escape across the Rufiji completely intact. Far from ending, the campaign

raged on for another 22 months. And one of the bloodiest battles of the war -- Mahiwa, where the British suffered 2,700 casualties and the Germans 519 -- had yet to be fought.

When Lettow-Vorbeck ran out of room to retreat in G.E.A., he merely crossed the border of Portuguese East Africa and continued the campaign from there. This tedious chase zig-zagged for miles and months through endless bush emerging finally back on the Rovuma River. In September, 1918, Lettow-Vorbeck crossed into Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia. He had been almost completely out of touch with news of Europe for a full year. In a captured British fort he came across an old newspaper and read the news of German reverses on the Western Front. On November 13th Lettow-Vorbeck and his forces captured Kasama where he learned of the cease-fire. On November 25th he marched his remaining forces, 30 German officers, 125 N.C.O.'s, 1,165 askaris and 2,294 porters to Abercorn where he formally surrendered.

In a sense both sides had triumphed, though the Germans triumphed at much less expense. The British wanted to take the colony out of the war as a base of operations for German naval forces. It did that. Lettow-Vorbeck wanted to tie up as many British troops as possible. He tied up 130,000 Allied troops that could have fought on the Western Front. There were 62,220 British casualties, not including porters, and the estimated expense to the British Government was approximately 72,000,000 pounds.¹ But for both sides it could be argued that the real fight was with Africa itself. Of the 62,220 British casualties, 48,328 died from disease, especially malaria. And those most affected by the African environment were, of

¹ Hamshire, C. E. "The Campaign in German East Africa." *History Today*, (April, 1965) pg. 258. Note: As no sources or methodology for this figure of British expense is given and as it is the only figure I have come across, it is suspect.

course, the Europeans. By 1917 the 2nd Loyal Lancashire regiment had been reduced to 345, down from 900 in 1914. The 25th Royal Fusiliers who had arrived in Africa with 1,200 men were reduced to less than 120 within a year. In European trenches, hunkering down under German artillery fire and keeping low out of the sights of German snipers life could be hell. But in Africa, even without the Germans, life for the British was miserable.

CHAPTER 2

THE TRIP SOUTH

The thought of actually going to war sprang upon England in 1914. But when the news of international military conflict finally crept in the back door much of England embraced it with open arms. Crowds gathered in the streets of Trafalgar Square to herald in the news. Indeed all over the continent crowds were gathering in the streets to cheer on the soldiers marching off to war. Only a handful had any idea of what they were getting themselves into. Most thought the war would be over by the "time the leaves had fallen from the trees," as the Kaiser put it. Perhaps the cheers, the flowers, the rejoicing were not so much for the prospects of war as for the end of this long anticipated event. In a letter to his brother in Canada, F. S. Oliver, a businessman, social-imperialist, and political *eminence grise*, wrote, "... there is a feeling that since the Kruger telegram, eighteen years ago, things have been working up to this issue, and a sense of relief is experienced by the ending of it."¹

In British East Africa and Uganda many of the European settlers, and most of them were young men, hurried to enlist. They didn't have to cross a channel to fight the Germans, just the border. Although those who had established substantial plantations and ranches were worried war would bring an end to their prosperous investment, others relished the idea of fighting on the open Serengeti Plains. Finally here was game that fought back. Christopher Thornhill, soon to become an intelligence officer, was

¹Cited in Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), p. 33.

living in East Africa at the opening of the war. He wrote about first hearing the news of war:

I felt I could hardly breathe until I joined something. ... I was only eighteen and ideas of war were different then. In fact, I had dreamed of war as a bygone indulgence enjoyed by our forefathers. If nations did fight in this age of civilization, they would only have a few pots at each other and then make peace. I had too often heard men say: "Oh, we are too civilized to fight nowadays." But this very evening I had actually read in the papers that they were fighting like real "good 'uns" in Europe.

In the spring of 1915 when the first British troops began to be sent to East Africa, hopes of returning by the time the leaves fell had faded into dreary winter months and been suppressed by bloodbaths on the battlefield. The Battle of the Marne and the First and Second Battle of Ypres in Europe and the Tanga defeat in East Africa had made the dull realities of a protracted war more plausible. Lord Kitchener, appointed War Minister on August 4th, 1914, was one of the few who realized at the outset that this war would last for many years. He said to a colleague, "A nation like Germany, after having forced the issue, will only give in after it is beaten to the ground. That will take a very long time. No one living knows how long."² In Europe it would take four years. However, four years was not long enough to subdue Lettow-Vorbeck in Africa.

From his first day as War Minister Kitchener advocated preparing an army of millions. The New Army, or Kitchener's Army, was at first an entirely volunteer army that grew rapidly in 1914 and was ready for duty in the spring of 1915. Lettow-Vorbeck would have been delighted had he

²As cited in Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962), p. 120.

heard the news that a part of this army, though very small, would be sent to East Africa to subdue him.

For members of the 25th Royal Fusiliers or the R.A.M.C. (Royal Army Motor Corps) prospects of service in Africa varied greatly. Some troops didn't even know their final destination until days into the transport trip south. Captain Robert Dolbey, a doctor in the R.A.M.C., describes in his 1918 memoir the perception people had of war in Africa:

To people in England, and, indeed, to many soldiers in France, it seemed that this campaign of ours in German East Africa was a mere side-show. It appeared to be a Heaven-sent opportunity to escape the cold wet misery of the trenches in Flanders. To some it spelt an expedition of the picnic variety; they saw in this an opportunity of spending halcyon days in the game preserves, glorious opportunities for making collections of big game heads, all sandwiched in with pleasant and successful enterprises against an enemy that was waiting only a decent excuse to surrender.³

George Wilby, an ambulance driver who had contracted trench fever in France twice, and was finally returned to England, looked forward to his duty in Africa. He wrote in a letter home to his girl-friend upon hearing the news, "I am bound for German East Africa this time sweetheart, – I have got my wish, haven't I – I would much rather have this trip than France, as I have always wanted to see the world a bit, especially Africa.... I don't suppose I shall be in German East very many months, as the campaign is almost finished there -- the Germans are surrounded in a very small tract of country and can't possibly hold out long."⁴

³Robert V. Dolbey, *Sketches of the East Africa Campaign* (London: John Murray, 1918), pp. xix–xx

⁴George Wilby, letter home, at the Imperial War Museum, London, (April 29th, 1917)

For Angus Buchanan, a captain in the 25th Royal Fusiliers, the trip south south started on a rainy April evening in London's Waterloo Station, platform Number Seven. With him were men from Honolulu, Hong-Kong, China, Ceylon, Malay States, India, New Zealand, Australia, South and East Africa, Egypt, South America, Mexico, United States, and Canada. Indeed, Buchanan had come from several months exploration of northern Canada. The 25th Royal Fusiliers weren't called the Frontiersman for nothing. They came from the very edges of the Empire. And there, under the drizzling sky on platform Number Seven, they were assembled in the empire's capital heading to one of its remoter fringes.

The train deposited the men at Plymouth, where many transports headed for East Africa began their trip south. Their ship, H.M.T.S. *Neuralia*, would carry them over 7,000 miles, stopping only at Gibraltar, Malta, Port Said and Aden before reaching their final destination, Mombasa. Sailing off the north coast of Africa many of the men gradually became aware of the immensity of the continent. They had sighted Africa on the fifth day out from England and yet it would remain in sight for another twenty days of travel. They would travel 6,000 miles along its coasts, and this was only a part of this great continent.

For many, life on board these crowded ships was their first taste of the hardships to come. Unlike those who served in Flanders, who conceivably could leave the trenches covered in mud in the morning and be seen at the hottest nightclub in London that evening, when one went off to Africa there were no quick trips home to recuperate. Quartermaster Sergeant A.W. Nichols of the King's African Rifles remembered the looming separation between himself and home as he left in a taxi, his mother and friends waving goodbye. "I shall never forget that picture: it

was the first time that I had really left home. Previously there was always the knowledge that I should return in a month or two; but this time I was going to a distant land, from which sad news of Eric Clarke had just arrived."⁵

On board a ship brimming with over a thousand men, the delicacies of pre-war life could not be duplicated. Angus Buchanan, a noted naturalist who had recently signed on with the 25th Royal Fusiliers, writes:

Young men who short weeks before, and all their lives, had enjoyed all the comfort and ease of home life were now feeling the first rigour of army service. It was common to hear the warm, soft, white-sheeted bed at home ruefully recalled by the men, when rolled in coarse grey blankets on the hard deck, or chrysalis-like, bound in hammocks slung from the ceiling in the impure atmosphere below.⁶

For W. W. Campbell, a motor lorry driver with the R.A.M.C, his transport, the *Port Lincoln*, filled with over 1200 men was met by one of the worst gales this former sailor had ever seen. He writes in his memoir:

I must confess that the following two days' horror below decks surpassed all my previous knowledge of how far bad weather could be responsible for misery and wretchedness. For forty-eight hours it blew a full gale; everybody was prostrate, not a morsel of food was fetched or eaten, and during those two long pitiable days and nights hardly a man stirred. On the morning of the third day the conditions below, as sufferers lay about in a state of exhaustion and physical collapse, can best be left to the imagination.⁷

⁵ A.W. Nichols, diary written on return to England, in I.W.M., (1918)

⁶ Angus Buchanan, *Three Years of War in East Africa* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1919), p. 5.

⁷ W. W. Campbell, *East Africa by Motor Lorry* (London: John Murray, 1928), p. 4.

The very crowdedness of these transports aggravated the troops. Campbell reports having to get up at 4 a.m. in order to assure himself the use of the lavatory if he wanted to shave. Often the water ran out. F.D. Rowland, a young signaler with the 41st Airline section R.E. Signals, who had served in the trenches in France, describes uncomfortable conditions of the 2,500 troops of various outfits crammed aboard a captured German liner renamed the H. M. S. *Huntsgreen*. Most of the enlisted men, like Rowland, were accommodated in the mess decks, trying futilely to sleep on tables and benches. The hammocks available to the troops went unused because most of the men had never used one before. Rowland decided to use one, and had difficulty growing accustomed to it. He writes, "I persevered with sleeping in the hammock despite the foul air but the food was unpalatable and by the second night most of the troops were sick."⁸

Possibly the worst conditions of any transport headed to East Africa was found on the small tramp steamer, the *Homayun*, which normally carried 800 pilgrims elbow to elbow up the Persian Gulf to Jeddah. In order to get Indian troops and British officers from India to East Africa as quickly as possible so as to participate in the assault on Tanga, the *Homayun* was packed with 1,000 troops. Sir Gordon Covell, M.D., the group's surgeon, describes the ship as "... grossly overcrowded, there being barely room for the men to lie down side by side on the decks. She was also infested by a peculiarly vicious type of red ant, so that it was impossible to sleep in the cabins."⁹ No wonder the troops who fought at Tanga had low morale and were not in peak physical shape.

⁸F. D. Rowland, *Young Contemptible: A Signaler in Kitchener's Army* (unpublished, written in 1975) at the I.W.M., p. 41.

⁹Sir Gordon Covell, Mss. Afr. s. 385-387, Rhodes House Library, Oxford, p. 1.

The *Huntsgreen* left from Devonport, just up the Tamar River from Plymouth. But it didn't matter which of these two southwestern English ports you departed from, all ships had to skirt the edge of the often turbulent Bay of Biscay. The *Huntsgreen*, which was travelling alone except for a destroyer escort, sloshed through heavy seas the first few days out. The waves were so large, Rowland writes, that occasionally "the destroyer was hidden." The uncomfortable rocking of the ships headed south would soon be replaced by calm seas and oppressive heat as the transports headed into the tropics.

Two routes were taken by transports and convoys headed to East Africa. The shorter route went around the Iberian Peninsula and into and across the Mediterranean Sea to the Suez Canal. From there it was a simple matter to go down the Red Sea, into the Indian Ocean, finishing at last in Mombasa after approximately a 24 day trip. The longer route, the one the *Huntsgreen* and many others took, and which could take over a month to complete (the convoys and transports never went faster than 9 knots and some travelled as slowly as 6 knots), went around the Cape of Good Hope and up the East side of Africa. Many troops passing Cape Finistere would begin to anticipate a turn to port toward the Straits of Gibraltar, expecting to be headed for Gallipoli or the Middle Eastern theatre. Often only the commanders knew the final destination, although once the Canary or the Verde Islands were spotted it was pretty obvious to the troops where they were headed.

The secrecy of destination and the destroyer guards was a way to avoid German sub patrols on the look-out for transport ships overflowing with troops. The convoys, as Campbell describes, were heavily protected:

Seaplanes and stubby-nosed dirigibles swept the surface of steel-grey and menacing waters, floating away from the harbour mouth to recede to mere specks on the horizon; destroyers darted hither and thither, and then, like a modern Goliath defying the hidden peril, a battle cruiser stood up majestically in the gathering gloom of evening and passed out to sea, followed immediately by a convoy of eight transports flanked by two auxiliary cruisers.¹⁰

Guarding against sub attacks was not an idle precaution. Charley Turner, a private in the 25th Royal Fusiliers, also travelled with Buchanan on the troopship *Neuralia*. He reports, in a diary he wrote a year later, that they came very close to being torpedoed in the Channel. The decoy boat in front of them was actually sunk. In the Mediterranean Sir Gordon Covell on his way to India and then East Africa in August 1914 missed crossing paths with the battleship *Goeben* and the cruiser *Breslau*, which were hastily made over to Turkey on the outbreak of war, by a mere 24 hours, as these two German warships head towards the Dardanelles. In the Suez Canal the transport ships stacked sand bags on the bridge for protection from enemy sniping along the shore, and British outposts, with their romantic white tents pitched against a vast background of tan, protected the canal from certain destruction by the Turks.

A.W. Nichols spent a nervous initial three days on board after leaving Devonport with several false alarms. Later in the war transports seemed to head further out into the Atlantic. Both Nichols and Wilby, who sailed south in 1917, did not spy land once they'd left the shores of England for two weeks. Nichols eventually spotted the Verde Islands, while Wilby did not see land until Freetown, Sierra Leone. On Nichols' transport, as well as

¹⁰Campbell, p. 2.

others, lifepreservers were required at all times until they were past Sierra Leone.

As soon as the seas became calmer and the temperature began to rise men took to sleeping out on deck. Hammocks were strung from every conceivable bracket or loop. The troops stripped down to their pants and still sweltered in the hot tropical sun. Buchanan first got a taste of tropical heat in the Red Sea. He wrote:

Damp, cold and wintry it had been in England when the troops had sailed, and men had cursed the weather roundly, as soldiers will, but now, lolling listlessly about deck, victims of oppressive heat, they would fain have recalled a little of that northern temperature for the benefit of bodily comfort.¹¹

Charlie Turner, a private with the 25th Royal Fusiliers, also travelling on the same boat as Buchanan, remembered the frightful heat of Aden, at the mouth of the Red Sea. "Aden is a Hades of a place. Too hot for words. It never rains here and not a solitary thing grows, only thing one can raise here is a big thirst. There is no shade and the sun pours down wickedly."¹² At Sierra Leone, George Wilby wrote that the, "weather was terribly hot here, and we left all our clothes off excepting trousers and helmet, -- but even then couldn't get cool."¹³ Arthur Kemper, a sapper in the East African Campaign, whose transport stayed at Freeport for three very uncomfortable days, described the miserable heat and humidity of a tropical port of call. "This is, no doubt, a very unhealthy spot. Am sleeping on deck, and the blanket is always very clammy in the morning. We are lying about 3 miles

¹¹ Buchanan, p. 13.

¹² Charles Turner, diary written December 1916, at the I.W.M., no page numbers.

¹³ Wilby, letter written April 29th, 1917.

from the town, yet it is so hot that we are in a continual state of perspiration. We draw our butter from the refrigerator, but it soon becomes a tin of grease."¹⁴ Since the bay at Freeport was dirty the troops could not use the sea water to bath or shower, and they were short of fresh water. Because of this many of the men on Kemper's transport developed a red rash due to the heat and perspiration and inability to wash up properly. He wrote, "It appears to be dangerous to keep 2000 men in a small space without the running sea air."¹⁵ The approximately month long trip began with the cool weather of northern Europe then got hot and stayed hot for the men travelling through the Suez Canal, but for the troops going around the horn, the weather again began to cool as they went further and further south of the Equator.

Besides the insufferable heat and crowdedness of the transports there were other things that made the trip uncomfortable. Rats were extremely abundant. Kemper heard them scurrying above his hammock at night and worried that they might fall on him, especially since he was completely naked. Bad food on board is mentioned over and over in the letters and diaries. Campbell suggests that his ship's diet of beef, potatoes, beans and porridge was the cause of an epidemic of boils. Troops reported that the food was often rancid or under-cooked. Lack of fresh water is also often on the minds of the men. Kemper got his first fresh-water shower in a tropical downpour more than two weeks after leaving England. And though ports of call were welcome reprieve from the long stretches of endless sea, the main purpose for stopping was to take on coal, a very nasty chore.

¹⁴ Arthur E. Kemper, unpublished memoir written July 11, 1919 from his diary, at the I.W.M. p. 7.

¹⁵ Kemper, p. 7.

Buchanan wrote of his experience taking on coal in Malta, which was repeated in Aden.

The ship coaled all day and late into the night; a process conducted by swarms of gibbering ill-thriven Maltese natives, meagerly garbed in ragged loin-cloths, who filed, endlessly, up plank gangways from the barges to the coal bunkers in the ship's side, each with his loaded wicker basket hoisted shoulder high.

Coaling is a filthy business. Before evening, despite awnings and closed port-holes, the fine coal-dust had sought its way into every conceivable corner of the ship, to be roundly abused and accused by a thousand discomforted Tommies. None were sorry to get it over, and all rejoiced when, the following morning, the ship hove anchor and took again to the clean-winded open sea.¹⁶

To pass the time and try to take their minds off the discomforts of these long ocean voyages on crowded ships the men developed various rituals and organized a myriad of activities. Nichols wrote of reading, writing letters, playing cards or cleaning up around the boat. At 10 each morning the troops paraded on deck followed by the captain's inspection. At 6:20 every evening Nichols and a friend visited the barber for a shave, a chat and a few minutes comfort in one of the only chairs on board that they could sit on. Then he would sit with friends on the hammocks "spinning yarns" until 9 p.m. when it was time to go to bed. Turner complained of being worked hard doing "all kinds of fatigues such as scrubbing decks, paint, butchers and bakers fatigues not to mention guards." For entertainment many of the transports organized concerts, boxing matches, lectures and sporting events. A ceremony was performed when Rowland's boat crossed the

¹⁶ Buchanan, pp. 9, 10.

Equator. Other onboard activities included the unpopular series of inoculations all the troops received to ward off the dreaded tropical diseases.

The exotic ports the ships stopped at for coal and water piqued the interest of the troops. In the course of a month long trip these troops saw some of the more unusual outposts of the British Empire. Gibraltar impressed Turner with its numerous large gun batteries. Buchanan remembered the towering "Rock" and the Moors who met the ship in small boats to trade. He wrote of Gibraltar, "Dear old Gib., so proudly British, to many it was the entrance to the promised land of adventure, and the portal of farewell to things that are near and dear to home."¹⁷ All the British soldiers, as all travellers, cannot help noticing those things which are new, unusual or different from home. Buchanan writes: "Conversation on board ship dealt largely with contrasts. Old pictures were compared with new and, in most cases, within the mind of the intelligent individual each fresh experience brought new expression and wide awakening."¹⁸

Many soldiers remarked in their writings about the quantity, variety and cheapness of fruit in the ports they stopped at, because, it can be assumed, fruit was neither plentiful nor cheap back in England. The inhabitants of these ports are often mentioned with several references made about their swimming and diving skills. The sight of people swimming in harbors was certainly a rare sight in England's cold and filthy harbors. The new and very different landscapes the soldiers encountered also left lasting impressions. About the Verde Islands Rowland writes, "The trip around the islands close in to the sandy beaches and tropical vegetation so new and

¹⁷ Turner, p. 7.

¹⁸ Buchanan, p. 5.

wonderful to me, reminded me of the travel and adventure books I had read. It was a thrilling unforgettable experience."¹⁹

Travel and adventure books about Africa had been best sellers since the late 1800's. Morton Stanley made a small fortune writing about his travels and explorations in Africa, and he was not alone. The English loved to read about sunny, warm climates. It was probably psychologically freeing to read about scorching deserts when the rain and wind has been pelting against the windows for weeks. Also the simultaneous rise of the popular press and imperialism fed on one another, the former romanticizing the later. The works of H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling and G. A. Henty stirred dreams of adventure abroad in the minds of young readers, readers who would grow up and sail off to war in Africa. Even so, the soldier's first encounters with such experiences were varied, depending perhaps on what they'd read or heard about the places they were now visiting. Buchanan and Turner, the first a captain with the 25th Royal Fusiliers, the later a private had far different reactions to Port Said and the Suez Canal, their first encounters with Africa.

Buchanan described Port Said as "predictive of things Egyptian, and of the weird beauty and strangeness of the Land of Deserts." Turner was so impressed with the inhabitants that coal the ship, who according to him, "were very quarrelsome and bloodthirsty lot and fighting each other all the time they were alongside -- heaving large lumps of coal at each other," that he completely missed the scenery and came away thinking that the port "... is not at all a nice place and quite lives up to its reputation of being the wickedest place in the world. Every evil and vice is here." But the two

¹⁹ Rowland, p. 42.

soldiers' reaction to the Suez canal and the deserts that surround it was even more contrary. Buchanan wrote:

By evening the ship was well up the Canal, and the scene was very beautiful and impressive then. Far as the eye could see on either side were deep desolate stretches of limitless desert, unbroken by the slightest undulation. Overhead, the sky was soft and peculiar; singularly wistful and hazed and unlike any sky one sees at home, while a brilliant rainbow, forboding, perhaps, a light shower of rain, lit up and went out low on the north-east horizon, away, apparently, at the uttermost edges of the world, where sand and sky merged almost without any visible line.

It was a strange brooding country, and it infused a vein of solemnity into the atmosphere, for it held a suggestion that it had something to say, could it but give utterance, as an unexpressed thought may do which lies dormant for unknown ages through the long, long life of mankind.²⁰

He goes on to describe a feeling he felt was shared by the rest of the men: "Suez was left with regret. Many were sorry to go to sea from a land so attractively picturesque and so full of indefinite mystery. And in after days it was men's habit to look back on this one brief glimpse of Egypt and recall it as the most novel and memorable picture of the many which unfolded before their eyes on their voyage to Africa." Unfortunately Charlie Turner has no such recollections. He writes: "The scenery along the canal is very wearying, no trees or vegetation just miles and miles of wicked sand and I felt relieved when we got through and came to Port Suez which is situated on the Red Sea at the other end of the canal. Nothing of much importance appealed to me here."²¹ It is quite possible, that Turner, possibly a less educated individual than Buchanan, has not been nearly as influenced by

²⁰ Buchanan, p. 12.

²¹ Turner.

the romantic writings of the day and so views the landscape and the ports with a more practical objectivity. He brings a sensible working class perspective to the trip and so notices the price of fruit and the relations of other working men. Buchanan notices what the local inhabitants are wearing, but pays little attention to what they are saying or how they say it, all of that to him is mere gibberish.

Things English immediately appeal to the soldiers despite what novel surroundings they are found in. The troops taking the long way around Africa view Cape Town and Durban, with its mixture of British culture and California climate, in a similar way as the other troops views Gibraltar. Many British soldiers vowed to move to South Africa after the war. Most of those who survived couldn't wait to get off the continent and back to jolly old England. Things English reminded them of home, but they were not the same.

For many of these men their trip south was their first time onboard a ship, it was the first time to experience real heat, it was the first time they'd seen landscapes devoid of vegetation and the first time they'd seen large groups of people of a different color and race. The trip and what was to follow changed in some way, the rest of their lives. In different ways for different individuals, but nevertheless there was always some change. Buchanan sums up the voyage well when he writes:

There are times in all men's lives when they go through experiences that remain for ever remarkable, either because they are so new and unexpected, or because they contain so much of pain and hardship. The men new to travel -- and there were a number of them -- who embarked on the good ship *Neuralia* will remember, to the end of their days, their first experiences on board a troopship and their first voyage to the

tropics; for it contained, for them, all the hardship of their new life of soldiering, and all the romance and pleasure of seeing a completely new and unexpected world.²²

²² Buchanan, p. 4.

CHAPTER 3

WATER

Water was treasured above gold in East Africa during World War I and sometimes even above ammunition, at least when it was lacking. When water deluged the troops during the rainy season, they hated it as much as they had longed for it just a few weeks earlier. Above any other single thing in Africa, water stood out in the minds of the soldiers who fought there. If they were not too dehydrated to write during the dry season, or if their writing paper was not too soggy in the rainy season, the troops wrote about water. The lack of it brought more intense misery than endless marches and the abundance of it, which spread disease, killed more than combat.

The lack and abundance of water played heavily on the strategic planning of the generals as well. The deserts in which the armies operated and the rainy season and rivers troops had to cross shaped military campaigns and were often of primary strategic significance. One of the very first major offenses, the British attack on Longido, which coupled with the landing at Tanga was designed to surround the Germans, was a failure not because of their lack of troops, they vastly outnumbered the enemy, but because of their lost supplies of water.

Eighty-six Germans and six hundred Askaris held a strong position on the ridge at Longido. They were attacked at night in early November by fifteen hundred British troops, who had recently crossed the dry plateau that stretched across the border into B.E.A. The British were supported by a hundred animals carrying water. The heavy fighting that ensued caused

the mules to stampede and disappear down the mountain. The soldiers were left with only the water remaining in their canteens. When the hot sun rose high in the sky the British commanders knew they could not remain there without water and so decided to retreat under the cover of darkness that night. Despite their numerical superiority the lack of water had prompted the British to pull back. The morale and condition of troops deteriorated rapidly in the hot tropical sun, and after a day with no water were in no shape to fight.

It was a shock to many British soldiers arriving from the well-watered valleys of England to realize what a blazing sun and no water could do to a man. P.J. Pretorius, General Smuts' famous scout in the East African Campaign, describes in his book *Jungle Man* just how debilitating a day in the sun with no water could be. He writes, "There are dangers lurking in the 'Dark Continent' other, and sometimes more deadly, than wild man or beast, and the greatest of these is thirst. In equatorial Africa the heat is often so intense that one's drinking capacity is unbelievably great, and in like ratio, the torment that follows lack of water is unbearable. On several of my safaris lives were lost from thirst..."¹ He goes on to describe the worst experience he'd had in this respect. He, a guide and several porters set out through dense scrub bush and sporadic forests of small bamboo for an abandoned village fifty miles away, which had a plentiful supply of water. They carried water in canvas bags, calabashes and aluminum water-bottles and hiked all day.

The next day they woke early and continued on hoping to reach their destination by early afternoon. The sun burned the ground and no clouds in the sky offered relief. He writes that, "By midday our water was finished,

¹ P. J. Pretorius, *Jungle Man* (London: George G. Harrap and Co., 1947), p.134.

and very soon our throats were parched. In other climates, such as humid England, a few hours' abstinence from water is unnoticed, but where we were it was not long before one could not swallow and every breath seemed a burn. By mid-afternoon, under the torrid sun, four of the boys were unable to continue.... The lips of all my boys looked as if they had been whitewashed with lime."² Soon after the guides and Pretorius reached the river bed where water was reputedly to be found. They dug in the sand of the dry river bed and four feet down found damp sand. At this point they were drenched in sweat from digging and began putting handfuls of sand into their mouths for the moisture it contained. Unfortunately at six feet a large rock blocked their way and they never reached the water-table. They were forced to set off back towards where they had started, every man for himself. Pretorius ends up finding and killing an elephant, in order to get its water.

I was so weak and overcome with thirst that I could not run, but I struggled forward in a frantic endeavor to try to shoot one of them. I had to fire at the last one of the group, and felt a wave of joy run through me as I saw him fall. But he got up immediately. Three times in succession I dropped the elephant, and the fourth time, when I was more or less broadside on to him, I gave him another bullet through the ear and finished him off. We staggered to the carcass.

I indicated to one boy where to cut in order to obtain the water of the elephant, the reservoir being under the last rib. The boy put the knife in clumsily, although I had warned him to cut carefully. He burst the elephant's water-bag and hacked into the entrails, and a spout of water and blood, about an inch thick, shot out of the beast's stomach.³

² Pretorius, p. 136.

³ Pretorius, p.137.

The three men who had caught up with Pretorius greedily drank this unappealing elephant's brew. Out of the 14 men that left with him, on their third day out only seven remained alive, and thanks to the elephant's water reservoir and a spring they found soon after all seven survived. As Pretorius' story demonstrates, thirst can debilitate within hours in East Africa and can kill not long afterwards.

Some British writers have wondered, why, at the beginning of the war Lettow–Vorbeck did not destroy major bridges along the Uganda railway, leading from Mombasa to Lake Victoria and thus cut off Nairobi from Europe. One of the reasons was the poorly watered terrain German patrols had to cross in order to get to the railway. As we've seen a soldier could not travel far without water and carrying large amounts of water was not easy. Watering–holes had to be located and secured. At the beginning of the war all water–holes between the border and the railway were possessed by the British and needed to be captured before patrols could be sent further into B.E.A. By the time this was accomplished the Indian expeditionary force had already arrived and were protecting key sections of the railway.

Occasionally during the war Lettow–Vorbeck had to abandon well–fortified emplacements because of a lack of water. Lettow–Vorbeck writes in his memoir about such a spot near Mount Kilimanjaro:

Towards the end of 1915 the shortage of water at Mbumuni Camp had become so serious, and supply so difficult, that only a post was left there, the detachment itself being withdrawn to the westward to the vicinity of Oldorobo Mountain. Meanwhile, the enemy's camp at Makatau grew steadily larger. ...water had therefore to be taken from Taveta on small donkey–carts

to Oldorobo, where it was collected in barrels. This carriage of water was an extraordinary strain on our transport.⁴

Lettow-Vorbeck writes of other situations, such as the one at Lolkisale, a mountain in the Masai desert, where his troops could have held out because they had water and the numerically superior British had none, but surrendered because they were unaware of the condition of the British.

In their writings a number of British soldiers describe hiking across the desert without enough water to get back and having to conquer a German outpost with water in order to survive. Arthur Kemper writes:

The porters are carrying extra water, and there is about 7 pints per man for us. There is none to be obtained in the country we are crossing. We have reached our halt, and are resting until dark, when we push on to attack a large German camp at dawn. If we succeed in carrying it, we shall be all right for water; if not we shall be short. It is a crime to touch it excepting under orders.⁵

In these situations no rear-guard was needed to prevent deserters high-tailing it back to base camp. In East Africa it was safer to fight the enemy for their water supply than to head back across the desert without any. A better motivation to fight is hard to imagine.

Charlie Turner, who was involved in a raid on an enemy position south of Longido, describes the logistical blunders made in their trek to Longido. The porters were sent out with water 24 hours late and the troops had to hike all day on only one pint of water. It was Turner's worst trek ever. He writes: "No one can describe the agony we went through. My lips

⁴ General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, *East African Campaigns* (New York: Robert Speller & Sons Publisheres, Inc., 1957), pp. 70-72.

⁵ Kemper, p.25.

and tongue swelled up big and fellows were reeling like drunken men, some quite raving . It was piteous. Then when we got the water it had been brought out in petrol tins and tasted very much of petrol and made some very ill for a time. The Indians who were with the column somehow got more water than we did. We had a pint per man and offered the Indians all the money I had 3 rupees 4/ for a mess tin of water and they would not sell."⁶ Turner describes many places in Africa not in reference to their beauty or mysterious appearance but in reference to how much water was there and what the quality of that water was. Of Longido he writes: "... a very nice place to camp. Plenty good water..."⁷

When water was found it was guarded like a precious treasure. Turner was part of a group of soldiers guarding a very unpleasant water-hole. He describes a green water that produced a "lovely green froth" when boiled. Even so they considered this water to be very valuable to the enemy as there was "plenty of it."

The quality of water found varied considerably, but was generally of an unappealing nature. Arthur Kemper writes about a particularly punishing trek through the desert, where even the worst water seemed appealing. "With the ground hot underfoot and the sun burning above, my bottle was empty, and I was glad to drink a mixture of mud and water which we were lucky enough to find."⁸ As noted water was often green in color, but this was far better than water-holes that had been fouled by zebra or the Masai's cattle.

Dirty, foul-tasting water was the least of one's worries when the troops finally located a watering-hole. Private Thornhill, a settler from East

⁶ Tuner.

⁷ Turner.

⁸ Kemper, p. 32.

Africa, described a patrol he went on where when they returned to their watering-hole after a day and a night's ride, their water supply had dried up to a tiny pool of mud and slime, and they had to quickly move on. Things became bleak, he writes. "By the middle of the day thirst was becoming intolerable and the patrol which we had accompanied could not go on much longer -- the weary animals could barely drag one leg behind the other."⁹ The mules eventually detected moisture in the air and followed it to a small beautiful pool of water between two rocks. Thornhill's companion, Fred, was so thirsty he joined the two mules on hands and knees at the water despite almost being trampled by the animals. However, Thornhill writes,

Suddenly he drew back and spluttering, said: --

"God! What shall I do? I've swallowed a young eel or something. Could see it quite plainly swimming about -- then suddenly it made a dive for me. No, I haven't swallowed it!" And Fred put his hand to his mouth. "Wow! It has got hold of me!"

And Fred was tugging at a slimy, black, sluglike insect which seemed to have a firm hold on the inside of his mouth and he was apparently in great pain. Soon blood started to flow from his mouth in profusion. It was some time before I realised what had happened.

"Don't tug at it," I said. "It only catches hold with the other end when you get the one end loose and each time it grips it cuts your skin. You've got a leech and if you wait a moment I will get it out for you."

"Won't it crawl down my throat?" gasped Fred, blood now trickling down to his tunic.

I made Fred open his mouth and there, securely fastened by one end to the roof of mouth and by the other end to the wall of his throat, was the unwelcome leech.¹⁰

⁹ Christopher J. Thornhill, *Taking Tanganyika. Experiences of an Intelligence Officer, 1914-18* (London: Stanley Paul, 1937), p. 32.

¹⁰ Thornhill, pp. 31-32.

Soldiers often found leeches lurking in water-holes. They were typically one to two inches long and could swell to the thickness of a pencil when gorged with the blood of their host. They usually entered the mouths of watering animals where it would feed for days before releasing itself in the next water-hole the animal drank from. Animals affected with leeches often grew thin and pined away. The Masai reported that leeches could sometimes kill an animal by attaching to its throat, which so inflamed the tissue that the animal suffocated. At one water-hole Thornhill reported his mount "got no less than four huge ones, and it was not an uncommon thing to see a man's mount frothing blood at the mouth." ¹¹

When the army was on the move, as it was during most of the campaign, acquiring and distributing water for large numbers of troops was a logistical nightmare. Because of the amount of water needed every day, it was very difficult to transport it from far away. Patrols, such as Turner's, were sent out to scout the surrounding countryside in order to locate water-holes with enough water to support 4,000 troops and sometimes more. Occasionally the columns had to halt if water couldn't be found up ahead and even pull back if the water hole they were using dried up.

Kellie, a staff captain from India who served with the 1/16 Punjabis in East Africa, was in charge of the allocation of water and its transport by porters. He writes: "The country we were to operate over was not well known and the basic factor was water. Water was always a problem. Occasionally one met a river or stream and had as much as one wanted, and could wash clothing. Oftener the supply was just a pool left over from the last rains, and was quickly exhausted."¹² During a severe water

¹¹ Thornhill, p. 39.

¹² Kellie, unpublished memoir written in 1917, at I.W.M., p. 10.

shortage he compares the value of water to whisky. "If one had a whisky and water it was not the amount of whisky one took that was watched, but every drop of water was counted."¹³

When talking about the British advance on the Ruvuma river he writes: "We were definitely brought to a halt by the question of water. The water supply in the place we camped consisted of one water hole which was quite inadequate for the supply of the column. The enemy was covering the next water some ten or twelve miles distant. Between these two supplies there was no water found in spite of the most careful reconnaissances. After a week of intense discomfort and hardship the column had to move back."¹⁴

The distribution of water, when it was found, was not always equitable. When F.D. Rowland and his outfit were forced to rely on a single source of water, the quartermaster limited the amount given to the troops to one pint per day in order for there to be more for his staff. Rowland felt it was an attempt to make the regular troops go out and find their own water, as one pint was severely inadequate for all their needs.

When water-holes of varying quality were found it was distributed hierarchically. Wynn Wynne, a scout in the East African Campaign, came across several pools along a stagnant river of varying quality. He writes:

At intervals [the river] widened into pools, offering convenient spots for drawing water. A little distance upstream was a particularly inviting pool. It was of such rare and refreshing clearness that I decided to preserve the water's virgin purity until the Brigadier arrived. After that I intended to use it for officers' drinking water. In the meantime officers of the advanced guard were to drink from a pool lower down. Below,

¹³ Kellie, p.10.

¹⁴ Kellie, p. 14.

other pools were designated respectively for troops', carriers', and animals' drinking water. Still lower downstream was the water to be used for washing.¹⁵

Unfortunately even the best laid plans run amuck. A dozen carriers, who had been relegated to the a pool just upstream from the animals, had slipped by the guards posted at the Brigadier's oasis and used it as a swimming pool, much to the disgust of the high command.

When the rainy season arrived, for a few days the great abundance of water was a delight, until day after day of torrential rains dampened the troops' spirits. Though not as intensely painful as going without water, too much water also had severe drawbacks. From a strategic point of view it was deadly to an offensive. General Smuts had to stop his drive south each time the rains began, giving the enemy a couple of months to regroup and rest. It also brought outbreaks of disease among the troops. Rowland writes from a soggy camp:

... we had several wet nights -- the weight and volume of the tropical rain was amazing, it flooded the tents and left us without a dry bit of clothing, or blanket These were the first of many wet, sleepless nights during the rainy season and we gradually learned how to cope with them. What we did not realise then was that sleeping on the ground in such conditions made us more readily accessible to mosquito bites and the eventual attacks of malaria, which were the cause of the great incidence of early sickness among the troops, and the loss by death and invaliding of personnel..."¹⁶

But the memory most seared into the minds of the men from England was not the rainy season and the torrential rains, after all they

¹⁵ Wynn Wynne, *Ambush* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1937), p. 89.

¹⁶ Rowland, p.46.

knew what weeks of rain were like. It was instead the supreme dryness of the land, the stupendous heat of the tropical sun. They would remember the feel of their once swollen, parched tongues, and the dirty brown or green water and how good it tasted after a day's hike on a pint ration. Kellie sums up the experience well when, on 2 pints water rations per day, he writes: "I know that I, and I think everyone else was the same, had a shave in a tooth mug of water, and have never felt so wet or so clean before or since."¹⁷

¹⁷Kellie, p. 10.

CHAPTER 4

FOOD

In all wars rations, the food which supplies the sustenance for thousands and on occasion millions, are always given considerable thought by the soldiers who have to force them down. Soldiers' rations have never been appetizing, but more often than not soldiers have always wanted more of them. World War I was no exception. On the Western Front the British were theoretically allotted rations equalling 4,193 calories per day. These food stuffs consisted of bread, meat and vegetables -- the essentials -- as well as tea, sugar, sometimes butter and jam. In the trenches transportation problems meant that the front line troops rarely got the amount of food they were supposed to receive. The largest obstacle in supplying the front line was the lack of enough shipping to transport the food across the channel. The English channel is only 21 miles across at its narrowest, and from there it was not much farther to points on the line. Imagine then the difficulty of transporting food stuffs 8,000 miles all the way to East Africa. And that was merely the beginning. The coast was days away from the actual fighting inland. The British soldiers in East Africa got nowhere near 4,000 calories. As a matter of fact often they were on the brink of starvation. It is no wonder then that their nagging stomachs focused their minds intently on the one thing only slightly less valuable than water -- food.

In the best of times the food the troops ate was nothing worth writing home about. Thus the lack of records about how good the food was. There are however an occasional mention of food that was more than just

edible. Arthur Kemper is enamoured with his daily ration of bread, which he refers to as "splendid." Unfortunately, often he had to carry his food and this presented a terrible dilemma for him. "...as we had to carry four days' rations this time, you can guess that I have eaten very little. It was either carry the food to eat or go without. I went almost without, as it was all I could do to get along with my rifle and equipment, which cut into my shoulders painfully."¹ Kemper, perhaps because he was in charge of supplies, seems to have lived far better than other soldiers, at least while he was in camp. Besides his daily supply of bread he also received bacon for breakfast with tea or coffee and either fresh meat or bully for dinner. He never got any vegetables but was well supplied with South African ham, and a daily dose of rum.

Food packages from home helped supplement rations, although one wonders what condition the food could be in after an 8,000 mile journey lasting as long as two months before finding its recipient. Nevertheless, Angus Buchanan writes that these packages were "

...priceless ... to their lucky recipients. I wish those at home who had sent those gifts could have witnessed, even though it might have brought tears to their eyes, those ragged men rejoicing over the gifts that meant so much to them in their need, and were not to be bought for their weight in gold. Yet, after all, they were but little things; such as a pair of socks, some packets of Gold Flake cigarettes, a cake of soap, a candle or two, and a few tins of sardines or biscuits. Nothing at all when you are living in civilization or near to it, but everything to men heart-hungry and half-starved of any luxury for nigh on two years.²

¹ Kemper, p. 34

² Buchanan, p.148

Mail was highly irregular on the front and many letters and packages were lost. Certainly the supply of luxuries in the trenches of Europe were far greater than in East Africa. East African officers did not have the luxury of skipping off to London on leave or shopping in French markets.

Occasionally, Buchanan recalls, a Goanese trader would set up a small store and sell what little he had collected. "On those groceries, or such-like, every penny of a man's pay was often spent the day he received it. Whenever the trader received a fresh lot of goods the news would fly about camp, and, as soon as nightfall came and liberated the soldiers from duty, he would be besieged by toil-worn troops hungry for luxuries, and speedily everything in demand would be sold out."³

Letters home, diaries, and memoirs are filled with recollections of the inadequate rations received in the line. Charley Turner writes of the rail line being blown up and once again being short of supplies. At one point his company was put on flour rations. Flour rations without bacon fat or lard to cook it with, Buchanan writes, "...is almost a "straw" ration, for flour and water dropped into a dry canteen lid doesn't make anything digestible or palatable. But if one is hungry it is eaten, and really the men were wonderfully patient over their "dough-nuts," and such scanty grub, even though they grew lean."⁴ At other points there was simply no time to cook what little they had. A short entry in Turner's diary summarily reports the hardship: "1 tin bully between 4 men about two biscuits each." There are numerous accounts of being put on half rations or worse. Kemper writes: "On the 30th January it was necessary to put the Nigerian Brigade at Mkindu on half-rations, which were reduced to quarter-rations on 13th

³ Ibid, p. 39

⁴Ibid, p. 37

February. The men driven by hunger tried to dig roots or pluck herbs to supplement their scanty fare. Many fell sick from poisoning, and a few died, while all ranks grew thin and dispirited under the endless downpour of rain."⁵

One would think that in the land of big game and jungles there would be plenty to eat. But as Campbell reports, "...one would have thought that in a country like this fruit and vegetables could have been obtained in plenty; in fact, the country we had traversed was practically uninhabited; we saw no village and no cultivation -- only the trees, the sand, and the rocks; and in the depots it was famine."⁶ On the Masai plain and in the region surrounding Mt. Kilimanjaro there was plenty of big game to hunt and fertile lands. But the troops did not stay in this region very long and soon pushed south into less hospitable country. And while they were on the move, when the soldiers needed the food the most, transport problems peaked. For a time the army brought herds of South African cattle with them as a mobile source of meat, but once they entered the tsetse fly regions to the south, their herds began to wither away.

Even in camp food could still be scarce. Buchanan writes of receiving a measured ration of bread, cheese and sometimes jam for breakfast, bread, jam and tea for lunch, and badly cooked stew for dinner. He complains that the stew was "...an unchanging dish which became deadly monotonous, and which, in time, many men could not touch, their palate revolted so strongly against the unseasoned, uninviting mixture."⁷

Campbell, a motor transport driver, perhaps had the most frustrating experience, having to drive loads of food to the front lines while suffering

⁵Kemper, p. 1

⁶ Campbell, p. 54

⁷ Buchanan, p. 37

from hunger pangs. He writes: "The provisions we carried were, strangely enough, denied to us, each bag, box, or drum being sealed and checked. But in any case, of rice, which formed the bulk of it, we were heartily sick, as we had to live on it."⁸

Mealie meal, a staple food of many Africans, grew on canes and tasted much like rice when ground, and was relied on often by the troops. Campbell writes of a disappointing Christmas dinner consisting primarily of mealie. "Christmas Day found us on the road, travelling to the river. We felt that a good dinner was in store for us that day. But no! It was mealie and jam for breakfast, mealie and jam for lunch, and mealie and jam for the evening (Christmas) dinner."⁹

Such insufficient and monotonous fare had its negative effects on the troops, especially when combined with long, blistering marches through the African bush. Malnutrition certainly reduced the vitality of their immune systems and made the troops that much more susceptible to the many diseases waiting to incapacitate them. Campbell writes; "Rice, mealie, quince jam, and bully day after day was nauseating and telling its own tale on the health of the men."¹⁰ Buchanan is more direct in his conclusions when he writes:

It is wonderful what men, living outdoors, can subsist on, but, at the same time, I will never believe that the cut-and-dry army ration, as served in Africa, is sufficient for men carrying on arduous operations in an intensely tropical climate. All units experienced a tremendous amount of sickness, and I am certain, in my own mind -- and many others agree with me -- that at least half of the sickness was caused, directly or

⁸Campbell, pp. 54-55

⁹Ibid, p. 93

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 90

indirectly, from lack of full and proper nourishment for a prolonged period.¹¹

He goes on to report that daily ambulances took in men who were either sick from fever or merely too exhausted to go on. This exhaustion he blames in part on the lack of adequate rations.

The Germans, on the other hand, knew what it took to keep a soldier active in the field and did everything possible to meet those demands. Lettow-Vorbeck, in his memoirs, describes how each European was assigned several porters to carry what he felt was essential equipment and food necessary to sustain a soldier in the tropics. As we learned from the British officer, Kemper, sometimes British soldiers didn't bring adequate amounts of food even when it was available because of the extra load. Also the Germans were retreating constantly and so their supply lines got shorter rather than longer. They often lived off the land, as Kellie reports, "...and left precious little behind that was of much value. The staple diet of the local inhabitant is "Posho" which is simply coarsely ground mealie, and "mohogo" which is a root. As every native shamba had a supply of both the Germans fed free as they passed." ¹² He goes on to say that generally the Germans, when captured, "looked fit enough and were generally rather better dressed than we were."¹³ It was also not unknown for the Germans to send porters through the lines to British supply depots, where, with the proper chit and enough money, he could get supplies for his German employers. Once, Kellie reports, Lettow-Vorbeck even sent a thank-you note to one of the supply depot's managers in appreciation for the items he had recently ordered.

¹¹Buchanan, pp. 37-38

¹²Kellie, p.?

¹³Ibid

It is no wonder then that the Germans were better fed and dressed than the British. Also, it must be remembered, there were far more British soldiers than Germans to keep supplied. Besides food shortages, many of the British soldiers wore uniforms in no better condition than rags.

Christopher Thornhill writes: "Our own socks had long since ceased to exist, for it was as much as the army transport could do at this period to keep the troops supplied in food, new issues of clothes being quite out of the question."¹⁴

If the British soldier had a right to complain about the lack of supplies, the African soldier who fought alongside him had even more to complain of. Europeans were apparently given priority when it came to distributing what little there was to go around. Campbell writes, "The native soldiers elicited our sympathy by showing us the ragged state of their clothing, all in tatters, and their bootless feet, swathed in bandages. They earnestly declared that they were in a state of starvation, living on one half cupfuls of rice per day for each man!"¹⁵

As in Europe, the problem in supplying adequate rations in East Africa was not in the production of the food stuffs as much as in its delivery. Whereas in France and Belgium the main problem was too few ships to transport the foodstuffs across the channel, in East Africa, though shipping was also a problem, the main difficulty was getting it from the ports to the fighting. At the beginning of the war all troops and supplies were unloaded at Mombasa in British East Africa. Later when portions of the coast along German East Africa were secured by the navy, other ports, such as Dar es Salaam and Lindi proved to be closer to the campaigns

¹⁴Thornhill, p.141

¹⁵Campbell, p. 60

inland. Where train lines were available supplies were railed inland. But as there were only two train lines in the entire country, this was not always possible. During the early stages of Smuts offensive the British built a train line from the tracks between Mombasa to Nairobi that tied into the Germans' line, which travelled from Tanga to Moshi. This greatly eased the supply of troops stationed in the Kilimanjaro region. However, the fighting soon pushed south of Mt. Kilimanjaro and before long was too far from train lines to be directly supplied by that means of transportation.

From the train lines or the ports, depending on which was closer to the action, supplies were then brought in first by F.W.D.'s and then by Ford box cars. Supplies were deposited at various depots and finally brought up to the front lines by porters or donkeys. Kellie, a staff captain, remembered these donkeys well.

2nd line transport if one was lucky consisted of porters, and if one were unlucky of donkeys. These latter were the bane of my existence for if they did not die, and upset all ones transport arrangements, and this they did with the utmost speed on account of "Fly" and horse sickness, they got sore backs; or if feeling strong would bray all night.¹⁶

Tsetse fly country made the use of horse, mules, oxen or donkeys very unreliable. Wynn Wynn writes, "The tsetse fly ruled out horses and mules,. Camels are useless where the ground is damp and slippery; their feet slip out from under them, they fall, and inconsiderately split their stomachs."¹⁷ Tudor Trevor describes a journey across Africa trying to catch up with General Smuts. "Our horses and oxen, having been fly stuck before we left German Bridge, were dying daily. How long that march took us I cannot

¹⁶Kellie, p. 3

¹⁷Wynn, p. 81

remember. I think twelve days, though the distance was only fifty miles."¹⁸ Thousands upon thousands of transport animals died during the war. One of Smut's chief of staff reported that "28,000 oxen died during the advance from Kahe to the Central Railway in three months. Later on in two months (September 15 to November 15) 19,000 horses, 10,000 mules, a further 11,000 oxen, and 2,500 donkeys died."¹⁹ Disposing of all these corpses proved quite a problem. Few of them were buried, more were cremated and many were simply left in the bush to be recycled by vultures, hyenas and the myriad of insects that crawled through the bush.

If your transportation wasn't dying out beneath you, it was quite likely that the road you were travelling on would soon be flooded. The rainy seasons were unpredictable and could come at different times depending on your elevation, proximity to the coast and other factors. Kemper writes deplorably about the rainy season of 1917:

January, 1917, the valley of the Rufiji became a vast lake. Swamps and lakes expanded, the roads dissolved into mud under the feet of the marching troops, and the problem of supplying the field units, already difficult, became almost impossible of solution. Motor vehicles stuck in the mud, mules could go no further, and the overburdened African carriers fell sick in increasing numbers. During the first days of February the foremost troops everywhere came to a standstill. Instead of further advance the only question now was how to hold the front already gained, how to save the troops from privations if not from actual starvation.²⁰

Lettow-Vorbeck, in his memoir, considered scientifically the problem of supply in East Africa. One of his conclusions was "...that the march and

¹⁸Trevor, p. 261

¹⁹Cited in Farwell, p. 306

²⁰Kemper, p.1

supply of a single company in the conditions there prevailing required about the same consideration as would a division in Germany."²¹ He also came to the conclusion that motor lorries were far better at transporting supplies than people or animals. He writes:

Although we had available only a few motors, namely, three cars and three lorries all told, they were in the circumstances a considerable help. The road being well made, the three-ton lorries could do the trip out and back in one day in dry weather. As carriers took at least four days for the same journey a calculation showed that one lorry could do the work of six hundred carriers, who required subsistence in addition. The principle, later maintained by the English, of replacing carriers and pack-animals by mechanical transport, is further supported by the fact that men and animals suffered severely from tropical diseases, whereas mosquitos are powerless against automobiles.²²

Despite the value of motor transport there were some places even they couldn't go and thus the need for porters. Lettow-Vorbeck, who had only three motor lorries at his disposal, claims to have used literally hundreds of thousands of porters to transport the food and equipment his troops needed on their long marches through the bush.

Though the British relied heavily on motor transport, because they put far more men in the field than the Germans they used a comparable number of porters. Wynn Wynn reports that the Umba Valley Force, which consisted of four thousand fighting men, used five thousand porters. Many British soldiers who wrote later about the war prized the porters and were amazed at not only how much they could carry on their head but also what a pleasant disposition they maintained. Wilkinson writes; "A word about

²¹Von Lettow, p. 26

²²Ibid, p. 45

the transport -- they were all porters and loads were supposed to be approximately 50 lbs., but they often exceeded this and it was astonishing to me how these men managed in the climatic conditions to go on from day to day jogging along and often signing."²³

Some of the British, however, had a less than sympathetic view. Wynn Wynn writes:

Of all forms of transport, the slowest, dirtiest, and most exasperating I ever experienced were the porters with the "Umba Valley Force." They were not professional carriers generally used by "safaris" (caravans) in peace. They were savages from anywhere, collected into groups under transport officers who were either members of the local civil service or experienced employers of native labour.²⁴

It is no wonder then that porters occasionally deserted and could also be difficult to recruit. P.J. Pretorious relates an experience of waking in the morning and finding both of his porters gone. He writes, "It left me in a quandary, and there was nothing for it but to return to the village we had passed the previous day and collect a new supply of labour there. But the natives were wily; on arrival I found not a man in the place -- only women. The males, suspecting I might come for porters, had disappeared."²⁵

Porters were worked hard and not always well treated. More porters died in the war, almost all from diseases, than did soldiers.

As Lettow-Vorbeck alluded to, automobiles, or motor cars, did not get sick, but they did have their own set of problems to deal with. There were virtually no established roads in German East Africa when the war started. There was, in fact, no way to get from the northern railway, the

²³Wilkinson

²⁴Wynn, p. 81

²⁵Pretorious, pp. 157-58

Tanga Line, to the central railway except by ship, which was fine unless the enemy controlled the seas, as the British did. Roads were improvised, and quickly in most cases. Kellie reports, "The roads were just the tracks cut out by the columns through the bush. They were seldom straight for more than a few yards as they dodged the larger trees, and were full of stumps which got higher as the ruts got deeper, until as I know from bitter experience, [the cars] hit the front axles."²⁶

Campbell, who drove one of the supply trucks, describes in detail in his memoir the many obstacles a driver might face in the bush: Flash flooding that wiped out roads, steep ravines, thorns that punctured tires, wild animals. Campbell heard the story of a driver who ran over a snake, but instead of killing it, the snake was flung onto the truck and eventually bit the driver. He also relates the story of a solo drive when his brakes went, the springs in front broke, and he dared not stop for fear of never getting started again. On another trip while transporting a wounded soldier, he writes: "Tyre trouble followed, so that I was obliged to conclude the remainder of the journey on two flat rims. The breakdown car had long since disappeared, after the convoy, but in any case would have been of no use to me, having completely run out of spare tyres -- twenty-eight in twenty-four hours."²⁷

Natural disasters were sometimes the least of the motor transport driver's worries. The Germans put a fair amount of energy into disturbing the supply lines of the British, developing many ingenious truck-stopping tricks. Campbell writes:

²⁶Kellie, p. 3

²⁷Campbell, p. 58

The gentle Germans had several subtle ways of intercepting motor traffic: by digging pits in the track covered lightly with a roof of twigs and dead litter; in concealing contact bombs in the deep ruts; by posting small scouting parties of Askari in ambush; and felling trees to obstruct the path -- a less crafty method. It was not pleasant to reflect that we might, at any moment, sink into the ground, rise into the air, be shot at from the blind bush, or be forced to a sudden and unpleasant halt.²⁸

But the greatest obstacle to the motor corps was the loss of drivers to disease and exhaustion. Campbell was brought to East Africa with 2,000 other reinforcements solely to replace the diminished number of healthy drivers. He writes:

Our fighting troops, so it was explained, were following the retiring army into wild and foodless country by long and forced marches, and because the motor transport system was breaking down, were starving for want of food and support. There were plenty of cars, but the ranks of the drivers had been seriously depleted by the ravaging effects of disease, the sun, and hard work.²⁹

With such obstacles barring the way between where the food was produced, tinned or packaged and where it was needed it is no wonder that food took on such immense importance in the minds of the soldiers.

Probably nowhere else in modern history have troops fought in a spot so remote from normal supply lines, nor in a place where proper nutrition was more badly needed. A tin of milk, Campbell explains, could become a gift of immeasurable value. And when at last proper meals arrived and perhaps a few luxuries, to the soldiers it was like the opening of Tutankhamen's tomb. Buchanan writes:

²⁸Ibid, p. 49

²⁹Ibid, p. 27

And then we had, what in the past few days we had come to dream of -- tea, tea, tea. Camp-fires were started everywhere, and we sat there and feasted our fill of tea that tasted threefold more fragrant and delicious than ever before, and on cooked food, warm and palatable, and long we sat into the hours when weary heads should have been asleep.³⁰

Only in the African bush could food from England taste so good.

³⁰Buchanan, p. 196

CHAPTER 5

BUSH

In East Africa "bush" referred to anything outside of the major towns and large supply camps, which in 1914 was practically everything. This landscape varied considerably depending on what part of German East Africa the soldiers were in. The first stages of the war centered around the Mt. Kilimanjaro area, much of it highlands. This was by far the most pleasant part of G.E.A. in which to fight a war, though its arid climate made dehydration a problem. Today it is one of the most touristed sections of Tanzania, where tourists come from all over the world to see Africa's tallest mountain and its variety of large wild animals. Thornhill writes fondly of his trip through this part of G.E.A.:

Fred and I were watching several great lolloping giraffe and a herd of wildebeest and zebra, all running before us, throwing up dust as their hoofs pounded the sun-baked earth. The morning was cool and the air as clear as crystal; a hundred miles away across the border in enemy's country could be seen the great white dome of Kilimanjaro, with the sun glistening on its crown.¹

This type of loving description of African landscapes is, however, extremely rare in soldier's writings. South of Kilimanjaro all the way into Portuguese East Africa the terrain was literally covered with dense bush. Staff captain Kellie with the 2nd East African Brigade describes the country as being primarily bush, sometimes thicker, sometimes thinner. He and other

¹ Thornhill, p. 27.

soldiers comment on the scarcity of open spaces, something they obviously were used to in England. Kellie was hardly fond of African bush. He writes:

They might be so thick that one could hardly get through it, and if one did one lost ones original bearings. If on the other hand it were open bush, then the grass, which was often thigh high, was as likely as not to be full of "Wait-a-bit" thorn which makes barbed wire look silly. It will go clean through putties and tear ones flesh. Many of the local whites used to wear leggings with shorts. I used to wonder why until I met my first "Wait-a-bit".²

At higher elevations, though, the troops would enter the dense, wet jungles, or primitive forests that Africa was so well-known for. Turner writes of such a place his company marched through: "This hill here is covered with dense forest and the undergrowth consists of all kinds of beautiful ferns. Every bothersome insect and reptile is here in plenty and many kinds of snakes. At times the stench from the rank vegetation almost overpowers me."³

But the one single character of the landscape that took almost every soldier by surprise was the very vastness of it. The fact that a country so large could be so sparsely populated and so unending was hard for a British soldier to comprehend. Campbell, on a rare stop in his motor lorry after the rest of the convoy has disappeared over the horizon, confronts this concept.

Now it was that, for the first time, I realised the vast solitude of the African bush at midday; the great silence that followed the

² Kellie, p. 1.

³ Turner.

cessation of the car's noisy progress, as we smoked a cigarette and listened in vain for evidence of the approach of any other member of the company, was awesome, in the vast extent of its lonely emptiness. To all appearance, the world stood still. From a breathless air the sun struck down without mercy, and the heat scintillated before our eyes in the form of dancing, shimmering waves of light. It was only after a while that one became conscious of a strange droning in the air -- prolonged and unbroken like the sound of a distant sawmill. It was not a subconscious head noise as one might at first suspect, but the hum of myriads of winged insects in the air, on the trees, among the grasses and the weeds, and in the closer confines of the thick bush -- yet tiny creatures were so translucent and elusive as to be invisible to the eye, even in flight.⁴

In the minds of the soldiers the bush did not connote merely empty spaces, devoid of towns and cities, it held rather a psychological terror that could also hold other-worldly beauty. This fact that Campbell realized, that it was at the same time empty and full, was frightening. It was a study in contrasts; a physical environment that could at the same time be attractive and deadly. It was Africa's equivalent of the *femme fatale*.

Francis Brett Young, a doctor with the Indian Army, describes his passage through the Pangani region:

...we had seen no sign of human habitation. An extraordinary thing this seemed to us who had marched through that country in the golden morning and had found it fair. We did not realise then what was borne in on us so heavily in later days: that the Pangani levels, for all their beauty-- for all their bright skies, their golden grasses, and the warm south wind that blows over them all day, were among the most pestilential regions in all Africa.⁵

⁴ Campbell, pp. 61-62.

⁵ Francis Brett Young, *Marching on Tanga* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1917), p. 46.

Much of Africa was like an Edgar Allen Poe short story, with something dark and sinister lurking behind the surface of benign looking landscapes. The horrors beneath those perfect blue skies, those towering snow capped peaks, those vast fields of green grass, were legion. The thing that was so puzzling and unnerving about Africa for the British soldier, especially those who had seen the horrors in Europe, was its deceptiveness. Thornhill comments on the duality of the magnificent backdrop that Mt. Kilimanjaro presented:

We were now marching almost straight for the white dome of Kilimanjaro, which was across the German border. What romance lay there! It was the country we hoped soon to conquer. That silent white mountain, lying peacefully bathed in the morning sun, was in sight of all the early fighting, as it could be seen nearly a hundred miles away in the clear highland atmosphere. It was a sinister landmark, always cold and silent, often mocking the wounded when they lay deserted and dying of thirst on those scorched open spaces, gazing towards the distant glaciers of icy water.⁶

The romance and the danger could rarely be separated in the soldier's mind and this image was often tinted by African adventure stories they had read before coming to Africa, as is apparent in Campbell's description:

We travelled through typical African country, thick forest land, with an occasional craggy, mountainous rock lying back amid a tangle of undergrowth -- deep, silent places, deserted and full of gloom, reminiscent of the mysterious romance of the Rider Haggard genre.⁷

⁶ Thornhill, p. 290.

⁷ Campbell, p. 202.

The "bush" then was literally bushes, trees, grass, jungle, but it was also a state of mind. A place separate from the world, especially civilization, where not only were German's and their askaris waiting to hunt you down but where nature herself had declared war on man. "No Trespassing" signs were not posted in nature's sanctuary but the punishment of crossing into it was far more extreme than a few nights in jai; often it was a life sentence. It was through this hostile environment that the British troops chased the ever-retreating German army. A 3,000 mile march through hell.

British columns heading south usually consisted of several thousand fighting men, but this number was easily doubled when you figured in the support network of porters and other non-combatants. Buchanan describes one of these columns stretching to the horizon: "When the column reached far out into the grass-grown, sandy plain -- for it was open highland here -- one could look back, almost as far as the eye could distinguish, and see the course of the column, as the fine line of a sinuous thread drawn across the blank space of an incomplete map!"⁸

Commander Roberts declared that his column rarely walked two abreast, and that marching in single file was "frightfully slow and tedious."⁹ These single file columns could stretch out over 10 miles. When pursuing the enemy, time was at a premium, and the troops would march day or night and often both. Kemper writes of covering 12 miles and resting for 10 minutes every hour. However, even with the rests and this short distance

⁸ Buchanan, pp. 67-68.

⁹ C. Roberts, from a letter to Mrs. Miller-Stirling, October 26th., 1917, Mss. Afr. 5-2051, Rhodes House Library, Oxford.

(when compared with what other troops were known to hike in a day) Kemper berates the terrible conditions. He writes: "It is terrible in the sun, which pours down upon us and the cracked and parched ground. Although I have a pugaree on my helmet, and have also lined it with a copy of "John Bull," the heat becomes so great as the day advances, that it feels as though we are walking bare headed. It seems as tho' my head must split this morning...."¹⁰

On another slightly longer march Kemper writes: "Marching in full marching order, and shoulders cut by the straps. 15 or 17 miles awful in the sun, and then have meals to prepare. Going all the way through country that is full of enemy patrols, and hear firing on both sides. Shall soon be in the front line -- Enemy very strong in this area. Aching all over after yesterday's march."¹¹ And as the old joke goes, Kemper had it easy. Turner after finishing an extended march, and feeling "nearly cooked" claims he has not had a wash or even his boots off for 13 days and nights. He goes on to report a continuous 48 hour march that was needed to catch up with the enemy.

Cecil Moore Dobbs, a settler from Thika who early on joined the East Africa Forces, writes of getting orders to return to Morogoro. The plan is to march fifteen miles a day, every day, until the dreary thousand mile trip is completed. At some point in this grueling march, Dobbs realizes he hasn't had his boots off for a couple of days. When he removes them he finds that "great wads of dead flesh was peeling off the soles of my feet. The next few days were absolute torture as I had to march with bits of cloth on my feet as socks were impossible. At this time too the whole column

¹⁰ Kemper, p. 37.

¹¹ Kemper, p. 22.

was absolutely smothered in scabies, the eternal itching and scratching drove one mad.¹²

On these long marches, especially ones to catch the enemy, sleep-deprivation was frequently complained of as one of the worst inconveniences. Kemper writes that, "When we drive the enemy as we are doing it is the want of sleep that tells on us most, as the column must keep moving to achieve its object."¹³ He goes on to describe what it was like tramping through the darkness:

When marching silently through the night I had plenty of time to think of you and Babs, but would be abruptly recalled by falling over a stump or getting a prickly branch across my face. Occasionally a shot would be fired, the bullet whistling and the sound echoing through the night with extraordinary clearness. Perhaps we had struck a small party of the enemy, and a burst of firing on both sides would occur, with perhaps, the rattle of the machine guns. On these occasions, however, hardly anyone gets hit, as the shots go anywhere in the darkness.¹⁴

Long marches sapped the troops of strength. Often at the times when they needed it the most, they were poorly supplied with food, out-running their supply lines. More than the snipers or the ambushes the mere act of walking hundreds of miles took the heaviest toll on once healthy soldiers. Tudor Trevor, a settler in Africa, and familiar to the hardships of B.E.A. writes about one abominable march:

There was no heavy rain, but every day and night it drizzled, and the men without coats or blankets were never dry and were half starved.

¹² Cecil Moore Dobbs, unpublished memoir written in the late '70s, at I.W.M., p. 46.

¹³ Kemper, p. 33.

¹⁴ Kemper, p. 34.

Added to this, there were thousands of flies, tsetse and others; we did not discriminate, for they all bit -- ticks and jigger fleas. When we got to Wami River, many of my men dropped out, and all of us were covered with sores. When a man could go no farther, his mates made him as comfortable as they could by the roadside, gave him a water-bottle and what food they could and just left him. In most cases he was picked up by some of the better-equipped troops in the rear, but in some cases he was never seen alive again. One man was found who had blown his brains out in the night, another who had been eaten by a hyena. (265)

The numbers lost could be staggering. Turner writes of marching 326 miles during the rainy season to Moschi. When he arrived he was completely worn out and resembled a skeleton. His group had left Kajirado 400 strong. Only 79 made it to Moschi.

In Europe soldiers were being shelled to pieces but for the most part they stayed in one place. Not so in Africa. It was not enough to fight the enemy, you first had to find them. In comparing the two Dobbs writes that, "the tedium of the daily routine of dreary marches was almost a part of the life I was accustomed to, but some of the officers from Home openly said they would prefer to take their chance again in France rather than continue to what to them were miserable conditions."¹⁵

When not on a night march, or when waiting out the rainy season, soldiers bid their time in camp. Camps were laid out very systematically and could become quite elaborate. Kemper writes of small towns springing up within hours of ending a day's march. The African workers cleared the ground with pangas and built Bandahs for all the Europeans. Kemper

¹⁵ Dobbs, p. 41.

describes these as "real rustic shelters -- a framework of rough poles covered with long elephant grass."¹⁶ (28)

Camps were almost always set up with the idea of defense. A perimeter was established and occasionally trenches were dug and machine-guns placed at intervals. Pickets were always posted. At one of Kemper's camps the entire spot was ringed with five foot trenches and dug-outs, and this surrounded by felled trees and branches. Armed with machine-guns and grenade launchers, askaris manned the trenches all night long. Kemper writes, "The camp is a real fort such as were in vogue before very heavy artillery was invented."¹⁷

If in close contact with the enemy, porters were placed inside these perimeters. If not, they were left on the outside. If the camp were well-established, soldiers might have crude beds made for themselves that kept them off the ground, but more often than not they slept on the dirt.

The first thing a soldier thought about when stopping for the night was setting up his crude bed where he would sleep. A variety of ways existed to accomplish this. When under fire or in very close proximity to the enemy, soldiers such as Kemper, would dig a hole in the ground to sleep in. Kemper writes of digging "the neatest little sunken bed for five. Just an oblong hole in the ground, with the earth from it banked all round. In this hole we are almost quite safe from rifle fire, and whenever we camp for the night everyone's first thought is to 'dig himself in.' I am sure it has saved me more than once, as the bullets are embedded in the earthworks."¹⁸

¹⁶ Kemper, p. 28.

¹⁷ Kemper, p. 23.

¹⁸ Kemper, p. 40.

Rowland, who worked for the Signal Corps, did not worry as much about the enemy as attacks from mosquitoes. He writes, "... usually, on trek, it was impracticable to put up a mosquito net and we donned as many protective garments as possible, e.g. cap comforter, great coat, etc. before getting down to sleep on the ground."¹⁹ Sleeping on the ground was discouraged by the army as it exposed one to a myriad of unhealthy parasites. If it couldn't be avoided, Army Orders described in detail the next best alternative. Campbell, the motor lorry driver, describes in great detail these proper procedures for protecting oneself at night from the flying and crawling enemies.

To prepare a bed on the ground, the first thing laid down was the waterproof ground-sheet; upon this was laid the one and only blanket, before lying down, for better warmth and additional protection against undesirable bedmates, snakes being credited with possessing a keen appreciation for a warm and comfortable place with a sleeping human. Sticks cut from the adjacent bush provided excellent uprights from which to suspend the box-shaped mosquito nets. The sight of all these erections gave one the unwelcome impression of a row of coffins, merely waiting to be occupied before being interred. With the bottom edge of the nets tucked in all round, the operations was completed.²⁰

But even with these elaborate preparations a night in camp could occasionally be as terrifying and uncomfortable as a night marching. As neat and comfortable a bed as Campbell could make, nevertheless, was occasionally disturbed by an unwelcome visitor. He writes: "I had no sooner prepared to turn in, my bed being of necessity on the floor, than a

¹⁹ Rowland, p. 76.

²⁰ Campbell, p. 34.

tarantula, as big as a hermit crab, and as black as death, darted out from the rubble and disappeared into the folds of my blanket."²¹

Camps were like small islands in the sea or an oasis in the desert, but they were always surrounded by the bush, that inhospitable terrain threatening always to close in and submerge the camp. When the sun set darkness enfolded the camp. Lights were not permitted when close to the enemy. R. D. Mountefort, an NCO with the 25th Royal Fusiliers, complains in his letters home of never being able to read. He writes: "There are no lights allowed on this stint, and at sunset, if you are not on outpost, there is no alternative but to go to bed, where, when fatigue obliterates the noise of the five hundred billion different varieties of insect, and the croaking of the bullfrogs and the somnolent snorts and groans of the niggers you may go to sleep."²²

When it became so dark that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face you could still hear the noises of the bush. Mountefort describes a lion serenading them at night and "a grasshopper chorus which you can never get clear of, but which is seldom louder than a locomotive blowing off steam at ten paces...."²³

If you could distinguish the object making the noise, you were lucky. Not knowing what creature called forth in the night was terribly unnerving. Campbell writes of a night that could have been clipped from a bad horror movie. "... long, blood curdling screams rent the still night air, and spasmodically vivid flashes of sheet lightning lit up the darkness for moments together, and noiseless, intensified the silence."²⁴

²¹ Campbell, p. 68.

²² R. D. Mountefort, from a letter home, Oct. 5, 1917, at the I.W.M.

²³ Mountefort, Nov. 15, 1917.

²⁴ Campbell, p. 58.

There was only one thing worse than trying to sleep in camp, and that was being out on picket duty. Despite the many precautions soldiers took in camp to ward off malaria—carrying mosquitoes, while on picket duty netting and fires could not be used. Many soldiers contracted malaria while manning the pickets. If you were afraid of lions or other large predators in the bush, picket duty was a nightmare. In the diary that Turner sent home to his wife Ethel, he laconically describes his night out: "Was out on picket that night, went about two miles out in the bush. Nothing happened beyond the animals lumbering through the bush all night. There are many Hyenas here and they make their uncanny moan all night. They are not very dangerous but are rather cheeky and their cry is rather unnerving."²⁵

And some camps were better than others. Obviously those at much higher elevations were better than those in the lowlands. Rowland recalls stopping at a signalers camp that seemed worse than prison.

But I do recall the noises of the jungle fringe of black night beyond the fire's radiance, noises of the scavenging hyenas, lions etc., which we had got used to at Lolkissale, but these were comparatively close and I don't suppose I slept much. It was a horrible place and I was glad to be on the move again when dawn came. As we left I felt unutterably sorry for my comrades who had to man such a post, it seemed like a death sentence, imposed by the authority who had selected such a place for a maintenance post. Probably the nature of the surroundings justified its selection, for the hazards to the wire must have been many, and disconnections frequent. I cannot remember which of my comrades were stationed there or whether they survived.²⁶

²⁵ Turner.

²⁶ Rowland, p. 76.

And then perfectly good camps could be ruined by rain. Rowland arrived in East Africa at the beginning of the rainy season and describes the period with a somewhat positive tone.

...the weight and volume of the tropical rain was amazing, it flooded the tents and left us without a dry bit of clothing, or blanket, but everything dried quickly in the daytime. These were the first of many wet, sleepless nights during the rainy season and we gradually learned how to cope with them. What we did not realise then was that sleeping on the ground in such conditions made us more readily accessible to mosquito bites and the eventual attacks of malaria, which were the cause of the great incidence of early sickness among the troops, and the loss by death and invaliding of personnel in the first few months in the country. One who seemed to take no harm was Jock Sutter, from Dundee who, on our first washed-out night, just lay calmly on the tent floor with the water almost level with his face, he was quite unconcerned.²⁷

After months and years of this troops did not approach these conditions with quite the same equanimity and high hopes. Campbell writes:

And once more the rains descended and the winds blew. It was so severe that some of the bedding and kit-bags lay in two feet of water. Men looked on at this hopeless muddle, dejected and miserable. A sergeant, ill almost to death, stood in the open, indifferent to the rain, and soaked through. He turned deaf ears to my entreaty to him to take shelter, saying that he had given everything he had, and they could now have his body.²⁸

The bush, even in camp, had a way of wearing away at soldiers, especially European soldiers. In camp, at night, soldiers had time to

²⁷ Rowland, p. 46.

²⁸ Campbell, p. 123.

contemplate their situation and compare it to what they had left behind. The nights, though filled with unpleasant sounds and pests, brought ones thoughts back to England or wherever home might be. Kemper writes of such a night:

I said to the fellow next to me last night, "It is ripping to lie down with Mother Earth for a bed, and the sky for a ceiling, and the trees as bed-posts." About an hour afterwards we were compelled to evacuate our position by an attack violently delivered by the "soldier" ants, and as they were all over the hill we had a restless night. Have stood this country well up to the present, but if they are giving us long marches daily in the great heat, I am afraid I shall be unable to stand it for long. I frequently dream of you, and sometimes of Babs.²⁹

The East African bush is world renowned for its big game and its big predators. To the hunter this quality of the bush was heaven, to the soldier it was yet another thing to worry about. The mere act of crossing a large river, dangerous enough with its swift currents could be complicated further by the presence of crocodiles. Dobbs remembers unpleasant moments crossing the Lurio, Ligonya and Lugenda rivers. He writes: " They were both deep fast running and chock a block with crocs. To make it as safe as possible we threw in an occasional Mills bomb...."³⁰ Crocodile and hippopotamus attacks were not unknown. Gordon Covell, another doctor in the Indian Army, writes of a crocodile attack, "On one occasion two of our scouts were wading across a stream when a crocodile seized one of them by the arm. His comrade drove the beast off by slamming it on the snout

²⁹ Kemper, p. 38.

³⁰ Dobbs, p. 45.

with a cudgel, but it came again and grabbed the man by the leg. The other scout again beat the creature off and this time was able to drag his mate to safety.³¹ In the rivers, in the bush, besides the fear of Germans there was always something to look out for, something to fear. If they could have just focused on the enemy, life would have been so much more pleasant for the soldiers in Africa.

Perhaps one of the most feared animals in the bush was the rhino. When disturbed he often charged the soldiers instead of fleeing into the bush the way many other large animals did. Tudor Trevor recalls one night in camp. A perimeter 70 yards in diameter had been established. They were close to the enemy, so each man lying down touched his neighbor to prevent any gaps in the circle. Machine guns were placed at intervals. He writes:

In the cold grey dawn a nudge was passed round the circle. Every man handled his rifle and awaited events. Then there came a succession of unearthly squeals a crashing and a rush of flying men from one of the machine guns. It was just light enough to see clearly, and we saw the sight of our lives. Two huge rhinos – a male and a female – with a baby, had broken into camp, had upset a machine-gun and were steadily, in no apparent hurry, chasing the gilded staff up most forbidding thorn trees. Many men rushed in and stabbed with their bayonets. The bayonets went in with apparent ease but would not come out again, and presently the cow rhino had some four or five rifles hanging on her like the banderillos in the bull at a bull fight.³²

The rhinos broke out the other edge of the perimeter and the cow and baby were shot and killed, but the male escaped unharmed.

³¹ Covell, p. 9.

³²–Tudor G. Trevor, *Forty Years in Africa* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1932), p. 265.

Covell writes that rhinoceroses were a particular problem on jungle patrols. "Patrols often used rhino paths as a means of getting through thick bush, and when travelling in single file would presumably appear to a rhino, whose sight is very imperfect, like some queer monster from another world. We admitted one of the Royal Fusiliers with a dislocated semilunar cartilage caused by jumping out of the way of a charging rhino while on patrol."³³

After a bad run-in with a rhino Turner begins to dread the animal. He writes:

On the 22nd of October, I was very nearly put out by a Rhino. He charged and a native scout who was very anxious about me apparently and was shouting at me to look out but got hit himself very badly and I heard afterwards that he died but I do not know if that was so. The same rhino did that charge killed a porter boy. It gave me a bit of a scare and afterwards I feared rhino when in the bush more than the enemy.³⁴

These charges were commonplace. Nearly every soldier who writes about his experiences in the bush includes a story of a rhino charge. Typically they did not cause too much harm, but the unpredictability of encountering them, and the tremendous size of the animal and the accompanying noise of their charge could be extremely disconcerting, especially in such already tense situations.

Thornhill captures the drama of such a charge when he writes: "Mules stampeded and all was confusion and – horror! There – bearing straight down on the tangled mass of humanity and horse flesh – was a great bulk that loomed up in the rising dust like some primeval monster.

³³ Covell, p. 8.

³⁴ Turner.

Onward it came with the rapidity of a cavalry charge, straight into the thick of us."³⁵

Rhino's were not the only large animals known to charge. Kemper reports being charged by 2 herds of wild elephants, at night. Elephant charges were far less common, but the image of a herd of charging elephants could put fear into any soldier.

Large predatory cats did not make their presence known until they were dragging you off into the bush. Lions were often heard roaring outside of camp. But typically if you could hear a lion, it wasn't stalking you. The terrorizing thing about lions and leopards was they could be inches away at any moment, ready to pounce, and you wouldn't know it. Covell writes of his experiences with lions:

There had been no hunting in this part of the country for more than two years, and lions had become very numerous and bold. With so many mules abandoned sick, they naturally followed up our line of march and frequently came into our camps at night. On one night in Kibata they killed or mauled two of my mules and two others belonging to the Baluchi regiment. During the same night a lion seized a sleeping Indian sepoy by the foot and dragged him about 20 yards, only dropping him when one of his comrades loosed off his rifle.³⁶

Though death by lion attack was very rare, they were often about in the bush. In camp, or on march with a thousand men, a soldier could feel relatively safe from lion attacks. But there was the constant worry of becoming separated from your company. Being stranded in the bush with lions about was terrifying to most Europeans and Africans. It was one thing to be captured by Germans. It was quite another to be captured by a lion.

³⁵ Thornhill, p. 28.

³⁶ Covell, p. 7.

Of course even in camp you were not safe from the man-eaters.

Arnold Wienholt, the famed scout and elephant hunter, describes an encounter with probably one of the boldest man-eating leopards in Africa.

... a leopard, coming into the camp at night (we had, of course, no fires), seized and terribly mauled my white companion. The horrible beast, sneaking in, had seized his victim by the head, and dragging him off his stretcher, had actually taken him away some fifteen yards before we were able to help him.

Calling out to Henocksberg so as to get his position (it was drizzling and patch dark), I fired to the left of his voice, and thereupon the beast left him and made off. The poor fellow was very badly bitten about the head, the worst bites being directly around the throat and eyes.

Hardly had we finished attending to henocksberg, than shrieks and shots from the lower part of the camp told us that the leopard had again attacked. This time he caught an askari, one of the picket, a Kafirondo named "James," seizing him, as before, by the head, despite the fact that the man was in his blankets right alongside the sentry. The leopard was, however, on this occasion immediately driven off his prey, and James, not nearly so badly hurt as poor Henocksberg, escaped with a few nasty bites on the head and one above the eye.

The attendance on James being completed, I really did hope our troubles for the night were over -- but not a bit of it. Within half an hour another series of yells and howls from the porters' camp hard by revealed that the spotted devil had returned to the charge. After the askaris had driven off again our too persistent visitor, this time with shots sufficient to represent creditably a small battle, they brought along a sorry-looking spectacle in the shape of my *neapara* (head porter), who had been snatched from his blankets and dragged off several yards. He, too, was badly bitten about the head and around the eyes.³⁷

³⁷ Arnold Wienholt, *The Story of a Lion Hunt* (London: Andrew Melrose Ltd., 1922), pp. 208-210.

Stories like this would quickly circulate throughout the army, until soon everyone was looking over their shoulder for the man-eating leopard.

Snakes, though they did not prey on humans, were still to be feared in the bush. Many African snakes are poisonous and though they did not hunt down soldiers they often slipped into warm bedding at night as a more comfortable alternative to a cold hole in the ground. Kemper killed a four foot long snake in his hut on night, and Campbell had a run-in with a black mamba that he managed to escape from unharmed. Regarding the nature of the black mamba, he writes: "It is generally admitted that the black mamba is one of the most dangerous of Africa's deadly snakes and reputed to be extremely vicious, even to the point of chasing a man and biting him on the leg. I heard of a cyclist who swerved to miss one having this experience, and, but for the fact that he was wearing leggings at the time, would have sustained a fatal wound."³⁸

Besides the animals mentioned above soldiers encountered wild dogs that would stealthy track the intruder until shot at, man-sized apes that blocked roadways, and giraffes that destroyed telephone wires by rubbing their necks against them. At times the soldier might think he was unwelcome by the large animals in Africa, and he was probably right.

Though the large animals of Africa could be terrifying, by far the most annoying creatures were the smaller pests. Rats, spiders, scorpions, ants, bees, flies, mosquitoes, fleas and ticks could make an otherwise uncomfortable experience a living hell. Large animals attacked or came into contact with soldiers only rarely, but these smaller pests were ubiquitous. Only in the very high plateaus could one get away from them to

³⁸ Campbell, p. 51.

any degree. Unfortunately much of the army's advance was spent in pestilential lowlands.

Though they caused far fewer problems than some of the other small pests, rats were feared the most. Kellie describes his first close encounter:

While at the MISSION I had what I think was the most terrifying experience of my life.

We had no tents, and lived in "banda" or grass huts.... These huts attracted the rats.

One night I woke up to feel something pass across the back of my head. Thinking it might be a rat in the hut I seized my pillow quietly and banged it down where I thought the rat was, outside my mosquito net. To my horror I felt it jump onto and then off my bare arm. I then realised that I was all alone in the pitch dark in the middle of Africa in a mosquito net imprisoned with a rat. I sat quite still for a bit and quietly sweated, then gave a yell and shot out of the net with the rat after me. I think he was more frightened than I was, but I doubt it.³⁹

Though rats are considered filthy rodents and ancient carriers of plague-ridden fleas, they were detested and dreaded not so much because of any disease they might spread, but from their nasty habits. Covell describes in detail some of these habits:

In the Kibata region we were plagued by swarms of voracious rats. It was not uncommon to be awakened at night by one of them nibbling at any exposed part of one's person. An officer of the 129th Baluchis woke one morning to find a rat curled up asleep in the hollow of his neck. One day we admitted an officer of the Gold Coast Regiment whose thigh had been shattered by a shell, causing loss of sensation in the leg and foot. The limb was encased in a Thomas's splint, but the toes

³⁹ Kellie, p. 5.

were exposed to the air. Next morning we found that the end of each toe had been gnawed by rats during the night.⁴⁰

Though rats were awful, the ones in Africa were really no worse than those encountered in the trenches in Europe. However, insects in Africa were a completely different story. In a letter home Mountefort compares the insect life in Africa to an H.G. Well's novel. "The insect life reminds me of that rather piffling book of Well's 'The Food of the Gods'; everything seems to have swelled to about fifty time its ordinary size. Butterflies are bigger than the palms of your hand. Grass hoppers are as fat as your middle finger, and there is a delightful little creature exactly resembling in features an English wire worm, but as long and thick as an ordinary black ruler."⁴¹

Though officially an arachnid, the scorpion, spider and tick were all lumped into the same category with insects by most British soldiers. The scorpion was the most poisonous arachnid likely to be encountered by a soldier. And though there are no known deaths from scorpions, encounters with them were frequent. Kemper writes: "We have killed a large number of scorpions in this camp, some of them quite big fellows. They fairly ram their stings into anything one touches them with."⁴²

Ants, though not poisonous, could inflict painful bites. Even those that did not bite could prove a serious inconvenience as witnessed by Campbell.

⁴⁰ Covell, p. 9.

⁴¹ Mountefort, July, 4, 1917.

⁴² Kemper, p. 48.

One night I was turned out of my bed by the invasion of an army of ants that came in a long procession from outside. Climbing one of the legs of my bed, they commenced their formidable attack.

They must have been on the march for hours, for my head -- the very hair of my head -- my face, and my pillow were swarming with millions of them -- small as pin-heads, but none the less unwelcome for that.

I had to remove the whole of my bed-clothes and belongings ... out into the open to get rid of the ants that had invaded all these things. To my disgust, during these long and very necessary operations, a snake dropped through the bottom of my bed -- drawn there in the first place, probably, for warmth.⁴³

White ants, Rowland reports, besides being a nuisance at night, could eat through the sole of your boot in a few hours if left on the ground.

Insects even interfered with combat. Bees were especially known for counterattacking soldiers after their hives had been damaged by gun-fire. In the battle for Tanga, on the G.E.A. coast, a swarm of bees had sent the Indian troops running for their lives. Despite popular belief among British soldiers, bees were not a trained secret weapon of the Germans. When disturbed they would attack both sides indiscriminantly. In an attack on a German position Kemper's unit was harassed by bees. He writes:

Today, the 9th, the column ran into a swarm of bees or small hornets. In a wonderfully short time, the whole line of column was entirely disorganised, almost everyone taking to the bush and forming up further on. I came through with 18 stings, four in my right ear, 3 on the nose, and the rest on the neck. It is not unusual for a whole column to be moved out of a position by the attack of these bees. They followed me today for over 1/2 mile. Have withdrawn the stings which are about 1/8th"

⁴³ Campbell, p. 191.

long, and feel none the worse, although it affected my eyes for a short time.⁴⁴

After such a bee attack, Covell, the army doctor, reports removing 52 stings from one soldier's head. Buchanan was also attacked by bees at the end of a day of combat with the Germans. He remembers the damage done by the bees more clearly than the casualties inflicted by the Germans. He writes: "They inflicted such punishment that many men could barely see through their half-closed eyelids on the following day, while everyone suffered from cruel yellow-poisoned face scars."⁴⁵

Though bees attacked in force, they did not do so very frequently. Flies, however, seemed to constantly be dive bombing the troops. They were everywhere, and many of them bit as violently as the bee. Dolbey, another English doctor, writes: "Just as every tree and bush has thorns, so every fly has a sting. Some bite by day only, some by night, and others at all times."⁴⁶ The worst fly of all was the tsetse fly. Not only did it often carry the sleeping sickness, which in its different varieties could effect man and more often horses and other livestock, it also inflicted an extremely painful sting. Dolbey described these pests as "Savage and pertinacious to a degree are these pests, and their bite is like the piercing of a red-hot needle. Hit them and they fall off, only to rise again and attack once more; for their bodies are so tough and resistant, that great force is required to destroy them. Their bite is very poisonous, and frequently produces the most painful sores and abscesses."⁴⁷ (158-59)

⁴⁴ Kemper, p. 44.

⁴⁵ Buchanan, p. 182.

⁴⁶ Dolbey, p. 158.

⁴⁷ Dolbey, pp. 158-159.

Dolbey concluded that the sand fly was the most annoying fly in Africa. Almost microscopic, this fly could slip through the holes of mosquito gauze. The fly tended to attack the feet. Its bite left the soldier with a three-day fever that was nothing compared to the "itching fury that persists for days."⁴⁸

But perhaps the most heinous fly was the bottle-fly. This fly, so Dolbey reported, bit holes in soldiers' skin, usually the back or arms, in order to lay its eggs. Ten days later the egg developed into a full grown larva -- a white maggot with a black head. Resembling a boil, the soldier might squeeze it and push out the maggot's squirming head. Unfortunately, if forceps did not instantly pluck out the larva, it would pop back beneath the skin and quickly die, forming an abscess. Dolbey remembered taking as many as thirty or forty of these grotesque creatures from one man.⁴⁹

Flies that didn't bite could still be bothersome. Campbell writes of "pugnacious" flies that got into your food and water. They even entered the mouth and "sucked the very juices from one's eyes, nose and ears, with a voracity that allowed them to be killed in the act!"⁵⁰

Flies were annoying and sometimes deadly, but by far the greatest killer in East Africa was the mosquito, or more accurately the *anopheles*, which carried malaria. A larger, noisier mosquito, the *culex*, was annoying but not the killer that the *anopheles* could be. Campbell describes his experiences with mosquitoes:

⁴⁸ Dolbey, p. 164.

⁴⁹ Dolbey, p. 164.

⁵⁰ Campbell, p. 126.

With the sinking of the sun the mosquitoes were on the wing in millions, and in astonishingly dense formations. Inoculation by the malaria-carrying mosquito resulted in an attack of fever in ten days, so we were told; but as an offset to this dark outlook it was reputed that there was only one malarial mosquito in twenty. Hourly I counted the odds of twenty to one on me diminish as I was repeatedly bitten!⁵¹

Campbell awoke one morning with 40 bites on a leg that had accidentally pressed up against the mosquito netting.

The jigger, or burrowing flea, *tunga penetrans*, though it could not kill, tormented the soldier, especially those who had to march. The fertilized female burrowed beneath the skin of soldiers' feet, usually the soft skin beneath the toe nail, and laid a million eggs in a little sack. These immediately began to itch incessantly, and needed be removed as quickly as possible. This was usually done very skillfully by Africans familiar with the operation. They carefully plucked out the sack, without producing any lacerations of the surrounding tissue, with a large brass safety-pin. If the sack hatched, the entire toe could become infected. Amputating a toe and sometimes an entire foot was not unknown. Dolbey remembers this little pest: "Dirt and the death of this tiny visitor (jigger) result in painful feet that make of marching a very torture. So great a pest is this that at least five per cent of our army, both white and native, are constantly incapacitated. Nor do the jiggers come singly, but in battalions, and often as many as fifty have to be removed from one wretched soldier's feet and legs."⁵² A corporal in the 25th Royal Fusiliers wrote: "I took twelve jiggers out this morning -- I think that is about the average each day!"⁵³

⁵¹ Campbell, p. 35.

⁵² Dolbey, p. 166.

⁵³ Cited in Farwell, p. 298.

Even when ensconced in a comfortable bed and camp at night, Dolbey writes, with few wild animals howling in the distance, your sleep could still be disturbed by a myriad of small pests.

A yell in the sleeping camp at night, "Some damn thing's bit me;" and matches are struck, while a sleepy warrior hunts through his blankets for the soldier ant whose great pincers draw blood, or lurking centipede or scorpion. For in these dry, hot, dusty countries these nightly visitors come to share the warm softness of the army blanket. Next morning, sick and shivering, they come to show to me the hot red flesh or swollen limb with which the night wanderer has rewarded his involuntary host.⁵⁴

The most dangerous of all Africa's creatures, the viruses, were also the smallest. They removed more soldiers from the line than German bullets or shrapnel. Indeed by July 1916 there were over 30 times more non-battle casualties than battle casualties. The 2nd Rhodesians lost only 36 men on the battlefield compared to 10,626 casualties from disease, 3,127 of these to malaria.⁵⁵ Of his own companies experience Kemper writes: "The amount of sickness is very great, and about half the company of about 150 have gone into hospital during the last fortnight. Have had 2 more doses of fever but have not been admitted to hospital."⁵⁶ Often your fever had to be debilitating to be admitted to hospital.

Malaria, in fact, was the most prevalent of all East Africa's afflictions. And blackwater fever was the most dangerous complication of malaria. Taking its name from the color of the sufferer's urine, which was tinted a

⁵⁴ Dolbey, p. 167.

⁵⁵ Farwell, p. 293-294.

⁵⁶ Kemper, p.52.

deep red or black, its onset was sudden and marked by very high temperatures reaching 104 or 105 F., severe chills, nausea and headache. Within a few hours of contracting the disease jaundice appeared and large quantities of hemoglobin were released. The body became dehydrated, greatly increasing the chance of renal failure, causing death in half of the all cases.⁵⁷ Dolbey, the army doctor, who often came in contact with soldier's stricken by blackwater fever could recognize the malady instantly. "It was written on their faces as they were lifted from ambulance or mule wagon. There was no need to seek the cause in the scrap of paper that was the sick report. All who ran could read it in the blanched lips, the grey-green pallor of their faces, the jaundiced eye, the hurried breathing."⁵⁸

In Captain Kellie's experience getting malaria was unavoidable. "Everyone got malaria sooner or later, and the kind one got was only a matter of degree. There was Blackwater, and cerebral malaria as well as the ordinary kinds to choose from. Luckily I got one of the ordinary types."⁵⁹ Cerebral malaria, like blackwater fever, was a killer. According to Dolbey, "...there is no aspect of brain diseases that cerebral malaria cannot simulate; deep coma or frantic struggling delirium."⁶⁰

Fortunately for those who fell victim to the more debilitating types of malaria on the trail, they were given a ride to the nearest camp on a stretcher. Covell writes: "The incidence of malaria was so high that one could expect some 5% of fresh cases each day, so that during a five-day patrol with 100 men there would be 25 cases of malaria. It was quite impossible to carry so many patients on stretchers, and all we could do for

⁵⁷ Farwell, p.295.

⁵⁸ Dolbey, p. 71.

⁵⁹ Kellie, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Dolbey, p. 74.

ordinary cases was to carry their equipment. Stretchers were only used for patients unable to walk, e.g., those with cerebral malaria or blackwater fever."⁶¹ Unfortunately for the ordinary cases they had to march with sometimes near debilitating fevers. Campbell reports that many soldiers simply fell down when stricken by fever. "After breakfast one of our men fell sick -- not from what he had eaten -- the Lord save us! -- but from the baneful influence of the climate. He collapsed suddenly and helplessly as men were wont to do when stricken down by fever."⁶²

Dr. Covell claimed that malaria was by far the chief cause of sickness in 1917. Admissions to hospitals reached the astounding figure of 1,423 per 1,000. The total number of cases of malaria in 1917 exceeded 40,000 with 2,291 deaths from the disease. The vast majority of these, Covell writes, "were non-immune Africans recruited in the Kenya highlands and brought down to act as porters in the holoendemic coastal belt. These suffered very severely from malaria and there were a large number of cerebral cases among them. The figures illustrate a fact not always recognized, that while the African negro is usually racially immune to vivax malaria, any immunity he may possess to falciparum malaria is partial only, and is dependent on frequent reinfection."⁶³

Another troublesome parasite-born disease was "relapsing fever," also know as "tick fever." A very small tick carried the spirillum, the actual cause of the disease, and lived at the junctions of the vertical can rods and soil in native huts. Any soldier sleeping on the ground near these creatures was bound to get infected. "Once in seven days for five or seven weeks, these men burn with high fever -- higher and more violent even than

⁶¹ Covell, p. 4.

⁶² Campbell, p. 58.

⁶³ Covell, p. 4.

malaria -- but sooner over," Dolbey writes. "As you may imagine, it leaves them very debilitated; for no sooner does the victim recover from one attack than another is due."⁶⁴

Besides the many parasite-born diseases, water-born diseases could be equally incapacitating. One of the worst of these was dracunculiasis, commonly known as the guinea worm. The larvae of this worm was carried by a tiny water flea, *cyclopes*, and was consumed by drinking unfiltered or water that had not been boiled. The larvae would then penetrate the intestinal wall and travel to areas just beneath the skin where they would hatch into worms. These worms then bore through connective tissue to favored areas of the body, such as the legs and sometimes the scrotum. As many as fifty-six adult worms have been found in a single person. The illness is extremely painful and is accompanied by fever, dizziness, vomiting, diarrhea, intense itching and other unpleasant symptoms.⁶⁵ Dysentery, of course, was another common water-born disease.

Army Orders demanded that soldiers protect themselves from mosquitoes and bad water. Campbell, the motor lorry driver, seems to have been an obedient practitioner of many of these orders, at least where the use of mosquito netting is concerned. Of course, he later abandoned sleeping on the ground and took up residence in his truck, where it was easier to set up the netting and you were above many of the pests who lived in the soil. For the ordinary infantrymen, following all the Army Orders was just too much. As a soldier you often felt fortunate just to have made it

⁶⁴ Dolbey, p. 77.

⁶⁵ Farwell, p. 297.

to camp and not be another casualty left by the wayside. Dolbey came to realize

how impracticable it was to carry out the Army Order that bade a man drink only boiled water and sleep beneath a net. Late in the night the infantryman staggers to the camp that lies among thorn bushes, hungry and tired and full of fever. How then could one expect him to put up a mosquito net in the pitch-black darkness in a country where every tree has got a thorn? Long ago the army's mosquito nets have adorned the prickly bushes of the waterless deserts. "Tuck your mosquito net in well at night," so runs the Army Order. But what does it profit him to tuck in the net when dysentery drags him from his blanket every hour at night?⁶⁶

Believe it or not, the safest place to spend the night was in an African's hut. The floor was covered in a layer of wood ashes that was typically deadly to insects and other noxious pests. The air was so saturated with wood smoke that virtually no flying bug could penetrate it. However, as we have pointed out, Africans were not immune from these diseases. Some of them, such as the sleeping sickness that affected humans, were new to East Africa. At the time of World War I sleeping sickness had recently been brought to Uganda along the the caravan routes from the Congo. Soon after it was introduced over one million Africans were dead along the shores of Lake Victoria.⁶⁷ Some Africans were immune to one type of malaria but not another. Far more Africans died from disease in East Africa during the war than Europeans. This, of course, is also due to the simple fact that far more Africans than Europeans fought and assisted the war effort.

⁶⁶ Dolbey, p.211.

⁶⁷ Dolbey, 81.

The British soldier entered the bush in East Africa with spirits high, excited about the adventures they were likely to face there. Almost no British soldier left the bush standing. Most were carried out on a stretcher or in a motor lorry and sent home on a hospital ship. Others managed to recover in primitive field hospitals that were over-crowded and under-staffed. But unlike Europe, where doctors tried to put soldiers back together after being ripped apart on the battle field, most of the soldiers' maladies were not battle related. As Dolbey astutely pointed out, "In this campaign the Hun have been the least of the malignant influences."⁶⁸ The enemy that wreaked the most damage on soldiers in Africa were armies of microbes attacking from the inside out. And when the British soldier finally came home he was haunted by recurring bouts of fever and memories of strange animals, bizarre landscapes, burning sun, and miles and miles of sandy roads. The African bush had worked its magic and taken over the primary spot in a soldier's memories, reserved for that typically most intense experience -- combat.

⁶⁸ Cited in Farwell, p. 293.

CHAPTER 6

COMBAT

On the left the ground fell away, as in front, and they had crept up the valley side in the grass and bush, until no more than thirty yards from our line-- when their fire burst on us like a thunder-clap. From then on one lost all reckoning of time, all reckoning of everything, except that there was something big on that kept every energy alive and working at fever speed. In the end, toward night, we had won, and won handsomely; finally routing the foe from their offensive at the point of the bayonet, and capturing two of the three machine-guns which they had in the line.¹

Despite the overpowering images that Africa produced on the mind, soldiers still remembered their experiences in combat as if they had happened only yesterday. As can be seen from Buchanan's description, in many ways combat had the same effect on soldiers in Africa as it did in Europe. In both realms combat produced a surge of adrenalin, senses were heightened, time seemed to stand still, and yet in his passages there are tell-tale signs of why combat in Africa was unique for the soldier. The dense bush was perhaps the one African feature that most transformed combat in East Africa. It made ambushes and sneak attacks possible, something that was much more difficult on the open fields of Flanders or through the tangled barb-wire in front of the trenches along the Western Front.

Except for the Mauser Model 1871 using black powder metallic cartridges, which was still in use in German East Africa at the beginning of

¹ Buchanan, p. 182.

the war, modern weapons dominated the action in East Africa. Here again, however, the terrain dictated just what modern weapons could adapt to the bush. Heavy artillery, though present, was used to a far less degree than in Europe. It was too difficult to haul large artillery pieces thousands of miles across Africa. The Germans used the 4 inch guns off the cruiser *Konigsberg*. These were very effective as they had the longest range of any gun in the field. Unfortunately they had to be abandoned whenever a hasty retreat was initiated. Lettow-Vorbeck used the four naval guns sparingly so that he was still in possession of one of them when he neared the Portuguese border.

Machine guns were by far the most effective weapon in the bush. Like night operations, the bush tended to cause rifle fire to go high. Private Turner, during his participation in the attack on Bukoba on Lake Victoria describes the heavy reliance on machine-gun fire.

This was about 7:30 and we did not drive them off until 12:00 midnight. They charged us again and again with greatest bravery, our rifle and machine gun fire played havoc with them. One machine gun of ours rattled 32,000 rounds off. Two or three times they were nearly through us. In the morning it was a pretty ghastly sight. Their dead lying thickly all over the place. Our losses were very slight, we being in trenches we were fairly safe.²

Lettow-Vorbeck knew the importance and effectiveness of entrenched positions defended by machine-guns. In this respect the tactics developed in Europe were also used in East Africa. However, unlike the commanders in Europe, Lettow-Vorbeck also realized the importance of strategic retreat. Because Lettow-Vorbeck could bring in no

² Turner.

more German soldiers than he had in country at the outbreak of war, he had to conserve his forces as best he could. He could not afford the blood baths of the Western Front. He was able, of course, to recruit thousands of African soldiers, but no European at the time ever made an African an officer, an NCO, yes, but never an officer. Thus to lead his men Lettow–Vorbeck had a very limited supply of Europeans on hand at the start, and he did his best to preserve their numbers. This shaped the types of battles he was willing to fight. Pitched battles fought to the last man were out. He had no interest in holding ground. Land was something Lettow–Vorbeck had plenty of. In a country bigger than the whole rest of the German Empire, to lose ground was not such a problem. When pressed Lettow–Vorbeck had no trouble retreating. He would move back to more favorable ground. Meanwhile his patrols would harass the British columns, ambushing them, cutting their communication lines, their supply lines, or anything that presented any easy target.

Because of the density of the bush a column of soldiers could march up to an established position, getting within feet of it, before seeing the enemy. Often they only realized the enemy was nearby when someone opened fire. Lettow–Vorbeck writes: "The last part of Schluz's advance had, indeed, been very arduous owing to the thick bush. The askari could only work through it step by step, when they suddenly heard the enemy's machine guns at work only a few paces in front of them."³ The victory typically went to the group that spied the enemy first. Thornhill concludes that, "The great secret in this type of Bush warfare is to see your enemy first. In fact in the East African campaign I have seen large forces of good soldiers routed by only a handful of men, who happened to be so fortunate-

³ Lettow–Vorbeck, p. 109.

as to catch the first glimpse and take advantage of it by lying in wait for the enemy to come along."⁴ This type of warfare obviously favoured the Germans who were constantly in retreat and could easily set up and wait for the British advance. This was a major factor in enabling Lettow Vorbeck's numerically inferior forces to hold-off such a much larger British army.

Buchanan becomes noticeably annoyed at the German's tactics, while at the same time recognizing their effectiveness.

Truly the enemy chooses his position well, and it is the country, not he, well though he fights, that robs us again and again of decisive battle. Their positions are, with rare exceptions, chosen where they and their movements cannot be seen, and thus their strength, at the many points of battle, may be either a handful of men or a dozen companies. Moreover, under cover of the bush, their lines are flexible to any change, while always, in the rear, they have sure and safe lines of retreat by which they can escape in the bush, in a dozen directions, to meet again at a given point when their flight is over. Moreover, the enemy is always on his own soil, whereas each new battle-front is, in all its details, for us an unmapped riddle of which eye and mind have no clear conception.⁵

The only quick way to advance on the enemy was across the few open mealie fields that dotted Africa. However, the Germans typically hid on the edges of these fields with entrenched machine-gun nests, ready to mow down anyone fool-hardy enough to attempt a crossing. At Tanga, the first major British defeat, the lesson of advancing across these open fields had not yet been learned, and it was only after several hundred

⁵ Buchanan, p. 139.

casualties that the British realized how costly crossing the more open terrain could be. The alternative was avoiding the fields and working around them through the dense bush. This, unfortunately, made visual contact with the enemy extremely difficult. Buchanan writes of such an experience:

The alternative attack was to advance slowly, through the all-screening, hampering bush, upon those concealed entrenchments in the grass; never sure, even when the enemy are located by their fire, of the exact position of the foe; never sure, at any time, what the next twenty yards of jungle hold in store for you. You are blind from the time you enter the rank jungle growth until you reach the enemy's position, and you are lucky if at the end you have sighted an enemy at all, though you have been blazing away at one another at some fifty yards.⁶

Besides destroying supply and communication lines, patrols were essential for locating the enemy in this blind bush. It was extremely disconcerting work as you never knew when contact would be made or who would make it first. Typically all British patrols, no matter the size, brought with them a machine gun complete with tripod and carried on the heads of two porters. The machine gun remained loaded with 25 rounds and the gunner marched just behind it. At the first sign of the enemy the porters dropped the gun and the gunner fell forward, took hold of the gun and opened up in the direction of the attack. Often the deciding factor in these surprise encounters was which side could get the machine gun operating the fastest.⁷

⁶ Buchanan, p. 97.

⁷ Kellie, p. 11.

Lettow-Vorbeck, who had travelled across G.E.A. at the beginning of his assignment there before the war, knew the lay of the land. When he chose to make a stand it was invariably at places that were the best suited for small defending forces. Salaita Hill was such a spot. In an effort to capture Taveta 6000 British and South African troops were repulsed at Salaita Hill by a mere 1,250 Germans and their askaris. But the Germans were well entrenched. Near Kahe, south of Moschi, Lettow-Vorbeck dug-in again. This time not on a hill but at the bottle-neck formed by Soko-Nassai River at its junction with the Defu River. The artillery opened fire and the British advanced within 400 to 800 yards of the enemies entrenched and prepared positions. Buchanan, who was part of the advancing force, writes:

Here our forces were held, and the battle raged bitterly for some hours. Some of the enemy machine-guns were faultlessly handled, and inflicted heavy casualties. The fight was across a dead-level open grass space, terminating in bush at either fighting line. It was in the bush, on the enemy's side, that their death-dealing machine-guns were concealed, and throughout the day our artillery failed to search them out. I saw those machine-gun emplacements later -- there were two outstanding ones-- and one proved to be on a raised platform, eight feet above ground, and skilfully concealed amongst the trees; the other was in a dug-out pit, with a fire-directing observation post in a tall tree standing just behind it. Where each gun had stood lay a huge stack of empty cartridge-cases, telling clearly that their gunners had found a big target. But where the raised gun had been, blood in all directions, and torn garments, and dead natives, told that not without payment had they held their post.⁸

⁸ Buchanan, pp. 80-81.

In Europe massive artillery could have easily destroyed such machine-gun nests, but that type of artillery did not exist. Covell claims that the Stokes mortar, which was issued late in the war, could have proven highly effective in these earlier pitched battles. Mentioned over and over again in British soldiers accounts of battle was the German's naval 4 inch guns. With a range of eight miles they could be set up between two different converging advancing columns and rain havoc on each.

These intense encounters in the blind bush between patrols and entire columns were extremely trying on both sides and could lead men to commit heinous acts. Private Turner, with the 25th Royal Fusiliers, unconsciously describes in his diary how such acts escalated.

On August 26 we had a bad brush with the enemy about 10 miles out from camp. The enemy surprised a patrol and got 14 out of the 22 men on it. I was about 2 miles away from the actual fighting but we got up as soon as possible. We had to advance so carefully the bush being so very thick. When we did get up we saw the most ghastly sight man ever saw. Our poor fellows were practically cut to pieces all their clothes were taken off them, even their identification discs were gone. We buried two fellows and they were cut about so badly that we could not tell who they were as we also had two men missing.

We were all very much upset and swore that afterwards we would take no prisoners and did not unless given very definite orders that the officers wanted one or two black prisoners to get information from. However we got our own back on the 13th of September. We knew a patrol of the enemy was out from Mbuyini so we went out with a company of the Baluchis. We stayed out all night and waited for them. We set an ambush in the shape of a bulls horns. They came along 44 askaris and two white Germans. They were talking and laughing. We let them get within about 10 to 20 yards before we had the signal to fire. It was great fun. They fell like nine

pins. Then the bugle went for us to charge. We killed every man and we only had two wounded. Then we stripped them of all their clothes which we burnt, laid the bodies all in a row and left them. I was past this place 14 days later and the animals and vultures had pulled them all over the place. A fairly weird sight.⁹

A young settler, Gethin, who fought during the early portion of the campaign, describes using split-nosed bullets, also called dum-dum bullets. These had a tendency to come apart inside a body and caused huge, gaping wounds. He claims he used these bullets for hunting and had forgotten to change to normal bullets when he came into contact with the enemy. The Germans were later charged with using dum-dum bullets, but, judging from Turner's experience, it is easy to see how these things could start and escalate from there.

In the writings of these soldiers it is interesting to compare how they faced battle. Turner, the young, single soldier, reveled in the action. He enthusiastically described one of his combat encounters: "They were on the right of the column, so my company being right flank automatically became firing line. Well we fought till dark. It was a terrible hot scrap and I quite enjoyed it. We got right up in the front line were very high and hitting fellows right on the other flank who were not doing any fighting actually."¹⁰ Kemper and Nichols were both married. Kemper was the older of the two and had a child. Neither faced combat very romantically. Kemper writes somewhat laconically about his encounters. "Sapper Sansom was shot dead at 2:30 p.m. and I had a bullet through my helmet. Quite a lucky 'let off,' as it almost scraped my head over the left ear. We were facing

⁹ Turner.

¹⁰ Turner.

machine guns, and several shells fell within about 30 yards of us. We were exposed all day, and I was lucky to get off so easily."¹¹ In another encounter he describes the memories he is sure combat will supply him. "Unless I get a bullet I shall have a few things to look back upon. We have quite learnt how to take cover in the shortest possible time, and we go down like so many sacks when they open fire. Yesterday I had a mouthful of burnt grass and sand which a bullet threw up a few inches in front of my nose. It gives one a creepy feeling when the bullets hit the ground all round one. Several men were hit near me, but no whites."¹² Close calls made Kemper think of home and what he could lose, and who he might leave behind. "Thought a lot of you and Babs before I went to sleep last night, and the Germans kept us on the jump with their 4.6 gun."¹³

Nichols, a seemingly sensitive young man, does not enjoy the adventure and has no expectations of the memories he will bring home. He only wants it all to end. In a letter home he writes:

I am lying in the dust under a blazing sun, waiting to be attacked by the Huns! A gentle breeze tempers the heat, a few birds are singing. Now and again comes the crash and rattle of artillery, the swish of machine gun fire and the crash of volleys of rifle fire.

I have been looking at your photo, Ida. I wonder how I shall get on today. I wonder if I shall do well, or become a casualty.

There are only three things which may happen, yet to live through it all will be an ordeal which I do not wish often to face.¹⁴

¹¹ Kemper, p. 27.

¹² Kemper, p. 36.

¹³ Kemper, p. 36.

¹⁴ Nichols, letter home Oct., 8, 1917.

Turner on the other hand did not feel the least bit nervous during his first combat encounter, but was a bit jumpy the next couple of days. Turner seems never to think about how he will "get on" in combat. In regards to the business of killing, Turner meets the challenge like a sporting match. It was him against an opponent, and there could be only one winner. Of his first kill, Turner writes:

This day I killed my first German, altho a black askaris. He was up a tree about 40 yards from me and did not know he was there until he fired, goodness knows how he missed me. I did not miss him and hit him through the chest and fetched him out of the tree. I got hold of his rifle and found he was using bad bullets and altho he was not dead he went out alright with one of his own bullets.¹⁵

"Bad bullets" can probably be interpreted as dum-dum bullets, and the reader can assume that Turner shot the wounded soldier with his own rifle.

Lieutenant H.V. Lewis, of the 10th Baluchis Regiment, found that his love of hunting transferred nicely to the battlefield. He was thrilled to go to France in September, 1914 and enjoyed the action very much on the front, only complaining about the noise of the shells. In East Africa he did not like the climate much but enjoyed the fighting and giving it to the Hun. The English certainly had the capacity to be as cold-blooded as any German. The range of British soldier's attitudes towards combat ran the entire spectrum, with Nichols being on the opposite side of Turner and Lewis. Near Schedela Farm after his first encounter with flying bullets, Nichols writes of the fear he experienced and his reluctance to leave the safety of

¹⁵ Turner.

the hole he has dug for himself. He becomes contemplative of his experiences in war and writes home:

How ridiculous seems this war to me! Here am I, one who never had a real hate, hiding in holes, taking cover behind bushes, walking about with a rifle seeking to slay men whom I never knew, never even have seen. These in their turn seek to slay or wound me who have no quarrels with them.

Oh! Systems, policies, politics, armies & navies! When shall come the great world-peace. Are we now approaching it? If we are, then this brutality is justified to an extent. Why, oh why is there no other, saner way! Does our vaunted civilization go for naught? Are our intellects spell-bound by tradition? Here, Nature was beautiful, and daily we are doing our utmost to render the country desolate!¹⁶

Dobbs recognizes this disparity in attitudes towards combat when he writes, "The leading sections had gone forward in the semi-darkness and the next lot were just passing me when from the heights of Longido came the rat-tat-tat of machine guns and the crack and hiss of bullets snapping through the bushes. I remember one of our fellows running past me shouting "that's the music" with complete joy, to me if that was music it was the funeral march, no hero me."¹⁷ Many have observed that a soldier could never predict how he would respond to combat until he had experienced it. Some of the most timid looking soldiers turned out to be the fiercest, bravest fighters, and sometimes those who bragged of their bravery shrank under fire. And then there were many whose attitudes of combat changed over time. Thornhill notes, "War has lost some of its glamour for many of us and the men of the Settler's Corps, once so eager and keen, live for the day when they can get back to attend to their long-

¹⁶ Nichols, letter home from neat Schedela Farm, Aug. 8, 1917.

¹⁷ Dobbs, p. 32.

neglected farms."¹⁸ By the end of the war many, if not most, soldiers felt the same as Kellie when he wrote, "From what I saw of the country it was hard to imagine what we were fighting for, and I felt that the best thing to do was to give the country to the Germans and make them live there."¹⁹

If there was one thing that all the soldiers in East Africa felt in common, it was the loss of their pals. Even cold-blooded Turner writes of the grief he felt while attending his first burial. "I was one of the firing party over the grave of the dead and I don't think I ever felt so sad in my life as I did then. I could not hold my rifle steady."²⁰ As time went on, however, Turner seemed to become hardened to the brutality and death of combat. A few months, and a number of battles later, he writes of one major battle: "I lost a very good friend that day. All the NCOs in my platoon were hit. This place is in the Ruwu forest and we called it the battle of Soko Nassai, very pretty part, lovely palms, trees, etc." He no longer mentions his feelings over the death of his compatriots and seems more interested in the surrounding country-side. It is possible, though, that by unconsciously diverting his attention it is a way for him to deal with the loss.

Loss was not only felt for one's fellow man, but also for the senseless deaths of the animals that accompanied the army. Dobbs writes of his first impressions of seeing his first human and animal casualty.

In front of me a fine fellow named Drake was advancing to rejoin the others when I saw him go down and struggle to get up again. Our doctor Captain Wilson walked out as though all was peaceful and attended to him, unhappily to no purpose and I saw my first casualty. Then I heard a hollow thump and one of the horses standing alongside me started coughing, and

¹⁸ Thornhill, p. 74.

¹⁹ Kellie, p. 15.

²⁰ Turner.

miserably he coughed on and on until at last he lay down and died. I must admit that I feel more deeply for those dumb animals than for a lot of my fellow men.²¹

Though there was heavy fighting in the beginning of the war, and though Lettow-Vorbeck continued to be pushed south in retreat, the intensity of the fighting never let up. Some of the biggest battles came in 1917, after everyone had predicted that Lettow-Vorbeck was nearly finished. One of the bloodiest battles of the African war occurred at Mahiwa, forty-five miles up the Lukeledi river from Lindi, after Smutts had left the field claiming victory. With van Deventer now in charge, the British suffered 2,700 casualties. These numbers can barely be compared in size to the losses on the Western Front, but when you consider that 2,700 men was more than half the total force involved in the conflict, the intensity of the fighting becomes apparent.

Harry Miller-Stirling, a new recruit from the Gold Coast, was only in the field in Africa a few weeks when he wrote home in October, 1917. He writes home: "I daresay you may hear good news about this part of the world long before you get this and then you may look out for another address for my letters. Hope you are all well and not worrying."²²

Optimism about the demise of Lettow-Vorbeck, at this stage, was extremely premature. In fact, the next news Miller-Stirling's family would get about their boy was written by Commander Roberts at the end of October. It read:

It is with very deep regret that I write to tell you of the death of your son, killed in action on Oct. 16 while gallantly facing

²¹ Dobbs, p. 32.

²² Miller Stirling, letter home, Oct. 3, 1917.

heavy odds under extremely heavy fire with his company. When he joined the 1st battalion on Oct 2nd., Captain Waters told me what a good fellow he was and that he would be a most useful addition to any Company he served with.²³

Death was ever present among the soldiers of Africa. The rotting horses that dotted the trail every few hundred yards, the men shrivelled and paled by fever, and the flying bullets, which could pierce helmets and crumple men into little balls who had once stood solidly beside you. Perhaps for the first time in their lives men thought about death, who they would leave behind and who would remember them when they were gone. Sensitive Nichols was prompted by the death he saw around him to write a will.

Will

Made on Active Service

If anything should happen to me, I leave all I possess to my mother, to be disposed of by her as she sees fit. In case of her pre-decease this will pass to my sister. I do not think it advisable to leave anything to my friends. I shall just pass out of their lives. If they do not remember me, I would not wish that this should be affected by a gift.

A W Nichols

Lindi 17-7-17

In the far off reaches of Africa, 8,000 miles by boat from home, away from the real action and not part of the daily news, with little or no contact with friends and family from home, it was easy to think you had been forgotten and that if you perished you would not be remembered. The vast expanses of Africa, the dense bush and the scavengers that picked your bones clean gave death in Africa an anonymous quality. In Europe even if

²³ Roberts, letter to Miller-Stirling family, Oct. 26, 1917.

you were blown apart in no-man's land at least some day your family could come to that spot and mourn. In Africa if your body was lost no one would ever find it or remember where it had last been seen. The fear was that when you died in Africa you dissolved into the primordial landscape, never to be seen or thought of again.

CHAPTER 7

AFRICANS

Besides combat, besides strange landscapes, and lack of food and water, the other major experience of British soldiers coming to Africa was contact with the Africans themselves. The cultural differences between East Africans and Europeans was astounding. The British who came to East Africa were coming into contact with customs and life-styles unheard of back in Europe except in travelogues and adventure books. Their notions about these new cultures and very different people were typically pre-formed by what they had read or heard. In some cases their initial prejudices towards Africans were positively modified by their encounters, in other instances the British soldier left Africa with biases even more firmly cemented.

Contact with Africans came in a variety of forms. Thousands of askaris, African soldiers, served directly under white officers and NCOs. Hundreds of thousands of African porters carried the equipment needed to keep an army supplied in the bush. Finally contact with the African residents in their villages in G.E.A. exposed the soldiers to a completely new way of life.

At the beginning of the war Africans were not relied on very heavily. Only four companies of King's African Rifles were present in all of British East Africa and Uganda and they were busy putting down local unrest. The first troops called in were Indian, British and later South African. As the war rolled on, however, and European and Indian troops withered under the

African sun and African diseases, more and more African troops were called on to serve. King's African Rifles were recruited from indigenous groups throughout East Africa as far north as the Sudan and even including soldiers from the same indigenous group that the majority of the German askaris had been recruited from. Even later in the war, especially when Lettow-Vorbeck was chased into and around Portuguese East Africa, African troops from Nigeria and the Gold Coast were sent for.

Of any group of Africans that the British soldier encountered, the askaris left them with the most positive impression. The askaris' ability to fight drew respect and fear from many Europeans. The fighting qualities of these African troops was what most impressed the Europeans who saw them fight. Mountefort writes about the Nigerian troops: "They fought like tigers and were popularly supposed to eat their victims if they got half a chance."¹ In all the accolades given to the fighting ability of the African soldier on both the British and German side, not one is untinged with some prejudicial remark or rationale as to why they performed so well. It was as if the European was not quite able to see the African as an equal even when the evidence stared him in the face.

Dr. Covell wrote of the immunity to malaria and other diseases when it came time to explain the effectiveness of African soldiers. "The African was accustomed to the bush, more or less immune to malaria fever, and could keep fit on local food-stuffs. Time and again we outpaced our lines of supply and on these occasions we were able to carry on with local foraging."² It could be argued that Africans living in the highlands, who earned there living by tilling the soil, were no better prepared for life in the

¹ Mountefort, from a letter home Feb. 1, 1918.

² Covell, p. 25.

bush than Europeans. It was noted again and again by soldiers passing through very pestilential areas that no African villages were to be found. The reason is they did not fair well in those regions, so why would Africans soldiers fair so much better in the same areas. It is true that the African soldiers were more accustomed to the mealie crops that could be found wherever Africans resided, but there are no reports of European soldiers not being able to digest mealie-meal. British soldiers seemed to have a hard enough time digesting their rations from England. It is possible, however, that by living active lives outdoors, Africans were in better physical shape than the urban Europeans who came to fight in the tropics. Some of the water-born microbes the African were understandably more accustomed to. There are conflicting reports about whether they were affected by dysentery. However, as noted in the Chapter "Bush," by Dr. Covell, Africans did suffer heavily from malaria.

The scout Wienholt believed that Africans could become, with training and discipline, first-rate soldiers. "In fact," he writes, "he really seems a born soldier, with his love of drill and parades, and my I.D. askaris have more than once asked me, when waiting a day or so in a big camp, 'if they might drill tomorrow.' Big children though they were, Lettow-Vorbeck's askaris gave an example of bravery, discipline, and loyalty on a losing side rarely excelled. At the same time, it is doubtful whether it matters much to the negro under which white man he is enrolled; it is sufficient for him to be an askari." ³ It is interesting to note, again, that Wienholt seems incapable of leaving his compliment of the African unmarred. He must lessen it by degrading remarks about the immaturity of the Africans and their lack of political acumen. The reason the African did not care which European

³ Wienholt, p. 191.

ruled him was probably because he knew he could expect the same treatment from either. The British and the Germans treated their subjects pretty much the same, not harshly but also with little respect or opportunity. When the Africans in Portuguese East Africa were conquered by the Germans moving south they were overjoyed. The Portuguese had been extremely harsh masters, and the Africans certainly knew the difference.

The British unanimously came to respect the fighting ability of the African soldier, which in some cases, reversed long-standing perceptions that the African could not fight on a par with the European. The South Africans, perhaps the most prejudiced Europeans to participate in the East African Campaign, were demonstrated this fact early on, in a rather embarrassing incident.

The next troops to arrive were the white South Africans. They too had several hard knocks and were surprised that the African could put up such stout resistance. I must say that we were not too proud at the display the S.A. formations gave. In their first big engagement with a great superiority in numbers they were in full retreat after hardly having really tackled the enemy. African troops in reserve had to advance to cover the retreat of the white South Africans. Not a very happy affair. The trouble was that the S.A. troops were not really trained and had the notion that they would soon settle the black Kaffirs as they called them.⁴

Dolbey recognized the transformation of attitudes when he writes: "To the Boer, as to all of us, this campaign must have taught a wonderful lesson, for many prejudices have been modified, and it has been learnt that

⁴⁴ Kellie, p. 25.

"coolies" (as only too often the ignorant style all natives of India) and 'Kaffirs,' can fight with the best."⁵

Despite the British soldier's general respect for the fighting ability of the African soldier, the pervading attitude towards them was patronizing. Nowhere were Africans deemed capable or mature enough to become officers and actually lead troops. Many Europeans saw the Africans effectiveness as a soldier as merely an extension of his childlikeness. Dobbs writes, "The great day in the life of a budding askari was when he got his rifle and bayonet. One saw nothing but white teeth in happy grins everywhere, to them this was the greatest effort the white man had made for general happiness, license to go out and kill and lots of games wheeling about showing you how to do it."⁶ To the Africans, so the British surmised, military life was just a big game where you were supplied with wonderful toys. It is hard to understand this when one reads the many accounts of the fear Africans showed to many of these same military toys -- planes, motor lorries, armed cars, artillery and machine guns. Africans, living in a pre-industrial society, were not used to loud noises and were extremely agitated when they came into contact with them. It seems incongruent, then, that they should seek out such experiences and deem them fun. In reality, the African had little choice about joining the military. If they did so voluntarily, there is evidence to support the theory that they did so for monetary reward only. They could make far more as soldiers in the army than as poor farmers. The delight they showed at receiving weapons from the British may have been due to the implied respect this gave them, or of

⁵ Dolbey, p. 8.

⁶ Dobbs, p. 37.

hopes of one day using these weapons to gain their freedom from the Europeans.

It was a step forward to be seen as responsible enough to carry a gun and die for the empire. But the next step of seeing the African as capable of leading troops was still a long way off. The ability of the Africans to lead in combat existed and was demonstrated time and again when officers were killed in battle and the fight was taken up with vigor by an African N.C.O. However, these incidents were not recognized. Wienholt, operating under the belief that askaris were no better than children, does not even recognize in his own accounts where maturity and capability stand out. He writes

One of our officers, Lieutenant McGregor, with a force of about sixty I.D. askaris and ruga-ruga, had been attacked in an isolated position by superior numbers, by a part of Tafel's force that was attempting to break south. This attack took place early in the morning, and McGregor put up a fine defense, but was unfortunately killed about midday; whereupon, there being no other white man with the party, the old black Sargeant-Major Commando (a Mnyanzwezi) took charge, and towards evening had completely beaten off the enemy.⁷

Wienholt makes no other mention of Commando's ability to lead, even though he is careful to compliment McGregor's "fine defense." Commando not only defended but lead his men in a succesful effort to beat off the enemy, yet he is only matter-of-factly recognized.

The British were unwilling to acknowledge the Africans ability to lead militarily for political reasons. After all, if you could be trained to lead militarily, why couldn't you be trained to lead politically. The British in East

⁷ Wienholt, p. 202.

Africa ruled not by force but by the intimidating idea of moral and intellectual superiority. The undying respect of the Africans towards the British, and Europeans in general, was necessary if they were to continue to rule. And with the fertile and beautiful highlands of Africa only partially exploited, it was still very much there intent to establish Kenya solidly as "white man's country." Dolbey recognizes the British rule through respect when he writes: "Prestige alone is the factor in the future that will keep order among these savage races who have now learnt to use the rifle and machine-gun, and have money in plenty to provide themselves with ammunition. The war has done much to destroy the prestige that allows a white man to dominate thousands of the natives."⁸ The mystery of the European had been spoiled by the war. The tricks of his magic revealed. The British were not as superior as they once seemed; they died like the rest of mankind. Dolbey writes, "...in this war, the black man has seen the white, on both sides, run from him. The black man is armed and trained in the use of the rifle, and machine-gun, and his intelligence and capacity have been attested to by the degree of fire control that he mastered."⁹

Not only did the African see the "white man" run, he also saw the huge disparity between how he was treated and how the British soldier was treated. Neither were well supplied, but the effort was always made to supply European troops first. African soldiers, as well as porters, were also whipped when they did not obey orders properly, a form of punishment that was never used on European soldiers. The item used for the whipping was called a "kiboko." It was made of a strip of rhinoceros hide. Kellie describes its administration:

⁸ Dolbey, p. xxii.

⁹ Dolbey, p. xxiii.

The method of administration was unique in some ways. The victim lay flat on his face naked, and with his head on his hands. A porter would most probably have to be held down, but an askari never. The executioner stood about his victims knees, and with a cutting action administered the number of lashes ordered on the part of the anatomy best designed to receive them. At the end of the ceremony which in the case of an askari was borne without a movement, the victim would stand to attention and salute and march off.¹⁰

One can only guess how they felt to be the only ones treated in such a harsh manner.

Campbell was the only writer surveyed who actually recorded how the African soldier felt about fighting for the British. During a convoy he met up with a company from the Gold Coast. They were in rags and barefoot. On being asked how they were doing they responded:

"No good, sar," said one stalwart native soldier to me, anxiously; "all time walk, walk, walk; no catch him Germans. He gone thick bush; no see! My country, sar, Gold Coast, not ver' good -- but this country, sar, Godam, ver' bad, soon all dead! Why English forsake us? Where new boots -- new clothes? Where food? Plenty in London! London ver' rich, sar; Englishman ver' rich, sar; You ver' rich!" (the personal reference embarrassing and not without pathos). "We are British soldiers!" he continued, pulling himself up with sudden pride. "We fight for you! You plenty boots, clothes, food got! Why we no boots, no cloths, no food got?"

The most subtle efforts to explain the true situation to these simple people failed. We were flatly accused of indifference, and no amount of assurance made the slightest impression. In an hour we were on the road again, leaving behind this motley crew of disgruntled and disappointed

¹⁰ Kellie, p. 5.

followers of a white man's cause, a cause they did not understand but which they felt most keenly at heart.¹¹

It seems only too apparent today that the African soldier understood very well what was going on. They realized that they were second class citizens in their own country. They realized they were fighting a European conflict and were not getting any rewards for their efforts.

Though Campbell, at least in the previous passage, does not seem aware of the real situation for the African fighting for the British, some of his more enlightened compatriots did. The reason Campbell's explanation of the "true situation" didn't work had nothing to do with the inability of the African to understand. It had far more to do with the speciousness of his arguments. The reason the Africans didn't understand the white man's cause was that there was none, especially as it related to them. One of Campbell's fellow soldiers had such an enlightened view. "The philosophic Thompson declared that we had no moral right in the country at all, as it didn't belong to us but to natives. 'And the sooner we are out of it the better!' he concluded. 'Hear, hear!' shouted everybody...."¹² They agreed that the British should not be in Africa and yet they also agreed that the African should never have been trained to shoot Europeans. One wonders why they would worry whether Africans were trained how to fight if they really believed Europeans shouldn't be there in the first place.

Wynne Wynn, who saw the destruction and deleterious effects of the war all around him in East Africa, wrote:

The state of portions of the country between Mombassa and the German border made me realize the cruelty and injustice

¹¹ Campbell, p. 61.

¹² Campbell, p. 170.

of two great powers allowing those they should have protected to suffer the horrors of war. The white subjects of the belligerents were fighting for themselves; the issues concerned them solely. Why should dark-skinned children who had been promised peace by their white masters have been forced to suffer for a cause they could not possibly comprehend?¹³

Wynn is sympathetic to the loss the war has wrought on the people of Africa, and yet he is still just as patronizing as other Europeans. It can be assumed that though the African soldier may have benefitted monetarily from the war, it was at a cost to the entire nation, and may not have been something even the askaris wanted. They fought merely as mercenaries for rulers who saw them as little better than children. It is not that they could not comprehend the cause that white men fought for, it is just that this cause had no applicability to them. Win or lose they would still be ruled by Europeans. They fought in the First World War in Africa in greater force and with greater intensity than any Europeans. However, it was not their fight.

Though the British soldier may have only superficially respected the African soldier and still patronized him, still, it was better to be an askaris than any other group helping the war effort. Porters, for instance, got virtually no respect. And yet in terms of their sacrifice to the war, more porters became sick or died than all other groups put together, they should have been raised up on pedestals. The heinous conditions British soldiers endured paled in comparison to the life of a porter. During a trying time the staff ordered Campbell and a few other European lorry drivers to help unload some trucks alongside some porters. Campbell's description

¹³ Wynn, p. 88.

reveals his repulsion at being included in the same work detail as porters. "It was the following morning when a small company of about a dozen of us were told off to join a gang of natives and help them unload material arriving from up the line. It was an unprecedented position. Never before had Europeans been put to such a task with natives, and we strongly protested."¹⁴ They went to the assignment but refused to work and were finally called off the task. If Africans did not lead, then Europeans also did not do jobs assigned to Africans.

Officially part of the Carrier Corps, porters were conscripted labor for the army, treated only slightly better than slaves. Indeed, Mountefort describes the porter assigned to him as his "... own personal slave...."¹⁵ Many deserted at every chance they got. To the British soldier the African porter was on the same level as a pack animal. Wienholt describes his porter in just such terms. "Truly the Mnyamwezi porter is a wonderful animal; there is no other living thing that can carry proportionately as big a load so far and so continuously."¹⁶ Later Wienholt describes them as if he were talking about a breed of horse: "My six porters were Kavirandos -- very black and of the truest negro type. The troo boy is generally quoted as being the purest type of negro, but the Kavirando also appears to be a very pure species. They are fine porters -- happy, cheerful fellows -- and I took a great liking to them, though really I prefer the Mnyamwezi."¹⁷ One wonders if Wienholt's fondness of his porters is the same type of fondness he would have for a special horse or dog.

¹⁴ Campbell, p. 124.

¹⁵ Mountefort, from a letter home, July 4, 1917.

¹⁶ Wienholt, p. 251.

¹⁷ Wienholt, p. 193.

Mountefort does not discuss his experience with porters in such friendly terms as Wienholt. He writes: "The porters were collected from all over the place, the Germans having collared all the local savages; and were often an unholy nuisance, men of one tribe refusing to eat with men of another, or even use the same cooking pots. I had some little experience of them while I was I.M.S. You may be awfully keen on the "man and a brother" theory in peace time; but on active service you are bound to come to the conclusion that the only argument which really appeals to a raw African savage is a thick stick carefully and firmly applied. I don't suppose you can quite picture me nigger-driving can you?"¹⁸ Again this British soldier sounds as if he describing pack-animals, not men.

One very interesting thing about the writings of soldiers in World War I and their experiences with Africans is that the later their accounts were published the more sympathetic and understanding they became of the African situation. Rowland, who wrote of his experiences 50 years later, describes somewhat mutually respectful relations with African porters. He writes:

The carrier or porters were of the Kavirondo tribe from the Kisumu district of British East Africa on the Eastern shore of Lake Victoria. I got to know them well. The headman, "Neimpara" I think was his title, was a tall, well-proportioned, cheerful, happy fellow who smiled "all over his face and half-way down his naked belly" whenever he met me. On the first occasion that I met him, when they were building the banda, I shook his hand and those of some of his friendly team. Whenever afterwards our paths crossed they would come to greet me with hand outstretched and broad smiles of great pleasure and friendliness across their shining black faces. I count it among my happiest memories to have known them.¹⁹

¹⁸ Mountefort, in a letter home, Feb., 1, 1918.

¹⁹ Rowland, p. 63.

Rowland remembers treating these Africans with a measure of respect, which is possibly why they were so happy to see him. D. Hawkins, an ambulance driver, also writes of a situation where some amount of respect was given to an African, showing that not all British treated Africans like animals. "{On a train} We had to make room for a black boy and his wife and family. They seemed greatly attached to their baby, and I may say that they set the white man an example in their respect."²⁰

In many of their descriptions of the Africans they met, the British seem to favor those Africans of lighter skin color or who had manners similar to those of a Europeans. Wienholt writes that his main guide, "Abdull, from a village called Mpotora, was a grand figure, a young man of perhaps twenty-six years; a really nice fellow too, and a born gentleman, straight, tall, and lithe as a panther, but, as his yellowish color indicated, not a pure negro. Of all the aboriginal peoples that I have come across, this man was the smartest and bravest of the lot, and never have I liked any native African so much."²¹ One wonders if Wienholt took to this man because of his lighter skin. Or if he really was such a fine man, could it be that Wienholt is trying to explain this phenomena by the fact that he might be part European, again refusing to admit that an African could have the same laudable qualities that the Europeans felt they were the sole possessors of? In Campbell writings he too paints a brighter picture of Africans with lighter colored skin. "In general appearance there was a marked difference between some, who were as black as coal, with incision marks on the face, throwing up into still greater prominence the broad

²⁰ D. Hawkins, from a diary written between October, 1917 and April, 1919, at the I.W. M. no page numbers.

²¹ Wienholt, p. 195.

nostrils and thick lips, and others who were real chocolate-colored coons, free from embellishment of any kind, and distinctly pleasing in character, with smooth, regular features, perfect teeth, and laughing eyes."²²

In their descriptions of towns and people it stands to reason that the British soldier found much more appealing those things that resembled home and was often disgusted with things that were very different from the ways of Europe and England. Many of the larger towns were divided into European and African sections. Turner describes his visit to the African side of Kisumu: "We stayed at Kisumu all day on the Sunday and it was very hot and we had a look around the native Bazaar and had a chance of seeing something of the customs of the Kaviorondas. They are a very dirty indolent race, very poor, wear no clothing at all, have no religion."

Many of the reports about African customs, written by British soldiers, have an ambiguous nature to them, as if they admire the way the African lives but are not sure how to fit that lifestyle into their own paradigm of how a person ought to live. Wienholt, for example, never seemed to be able to say anything positive about Africans without also including some derogatory statement, as is seen in this example: "Old Rensberg used to say, "A nigger is a nigger, and he dies a nigger," and I believe he spoke truly. Still, I found much to like, and frequently much of the gentleman, in the raw, untutored native African."²³ Campbell begins a discussion about African humor by writing, "The native sense of humour is a gift exclusive to such simple folk; they are not constrained by the dictates of "manners," their minds are not cloaked by the false veneer of convention. Following the natural feeling to laugh or to cry, they do so whenever the occasion

²² Campbell, p. 30.

²³ Wienholt, p. 251.

should arise, with unrestrained frankness." In this paragraph the reader is led to believe that the African sense of humor is simple and childish, yet he then goes on to describe an incident of a European playing a prank on an African by knocking off his hat. "The hat went flying through space, and the native, mystified by its sudden disappearance, turned to ascertain the cause of this strange phenomenon. When he realized that a white man had seen fun in an act so barren he laughed the louder of the two. It prompted a thought as to whose sense of humour was the better."²⁴ The reader can conclude then that though the African's sense of humor was simple, it was still better than the Europeans. Campbell, himself, like the other British soldiers, would be very hesitant to make such positive generalizations about Africans. They might recognize a positive quality in an individual but to say this was true about all Africans, to admit that in some ways Africans might be superior to Europeans, was taboo.

Contact with Africans and their way of life made many British soldiers reexamine their cultural heritage and put it to the test for the first time ever. In many cases they became more set in their ways and in their feelings of superiority. However, in some cases they appreciated this new way of life and brought home with them greater respect and tolerance for Africans. Then there were those who never seemed to be able to reconcile the way they had been taught to think with evidence that proved some of these preconceived notions unviable. Turner is a good example of the soldier who feelings are ambiguous about what he sees around him. Often he berates the Africans for not wearing clothes. But after he has been in Africa awhile he writes: "The least clothes they wear the more moral they

²⁴ Campbell, p. 118.

are. When they get a bit civilized and start wearing clothes then it is that they go bad. In town etc."²⁵

Obviously the Africans were very technologically unsophisticated and yet from reports of almost all the soldiers, they were far happier than people back home and often more moral. The soldiers also came to see the Africans, though they didn't want to admit it, as far more capable than they'd realized. This subconscious realization panicked many as they began to understand that their hold on the colony was no longer as secure as it had been. Soldiers' set notions of civilization were also seriously challenged by their experiences in Africa. Campbell writes:

The outbreak of war showed that the state of civilisation had collapsed, real civilisation only existing in our vain imaginings. Our civilisation was merely an effort to attain to the ideal state, and we were a long way off that yet. Had the natives, in their ignorance of the world and in their simplicity, a life nearer *real* happiness than we? Watch them, dancing, laughing, and singing in the sun, like children! They didn't bother about convention, or clothes, or the passage of time. If their state of mind was a happier one than ours, then possibly they were more civilised than we were!²⁶ (184)

It is hard to imagine that any British soldier returning home would ever again be able to see his country in the same way after witnessing such a different culture in Africa.

²⁵ Turner.

²⁶ Campbell, p. 184.

CHAPTER 8

AFRICA

When British soldiers left the shores of Africa to return to England, they did not remember just the lack of water or food, the bush, the combat or their relations with Africans. Rather they remembered Africa as a whole. The entire experience was synthesized in their minds to become one large mental tapestry of images, feelings, and sensations. Some images stood out more than others. Rowland, with the Signal Corps, wrote about his experiences 50 years after he returned and yet the snows of Kilimanjaro remained seared in his mind. "Before reaching Taveta the snow-capped peak of Kilimanjaro came into view during the afternoon. But for the tropical sun glistening on the crystal snow it appeared to be a huge white cloud in the deep blue sky. An amazing spectacle to us all, and incredible to some, that there was a mountain with snow on top in that equatorial heat. It remained a landmark for months; when about 150 miles southwestward, I saw it reflect the evening sun."¹ And Campbell wrote: "Before us was familiar African bush, an expansive plain covered thickly with scrub and trees, broken only by a great solitary rock that reared its massive head high above the surrounding level. It is doubtful if there are more striking contrasts of scenery in the whole world than are to be seen in such typical stretches of East Africa."²

¹ Rowland, p. 48.

² Campbell, p. 161.

As with the writers who wrote famous memoirs about their experiences in the trenches on the Western Front, it was the contrasts and ironies that seemed to linger in the minds of soldiers who had fought in Africa, to remain there for the rest of their lives. And perhaps even more than the Western Front Africa, by its very nature, was a land of mysterious incongruity. Nichols writes, at the end of the war as he is leaving on a hospital ship, about the port that saw his entry into Africa and his exit: "Lindi, I shall never forget you. This is where Africa began to take hold of me; its dreariness and brilliance, its squalor and magnificence." Nichols, like nearly everyone who came to Africa, had mixed feelings about his experience there and the country itself. In retrospection he writes:

When I look back I wish that I had stayed at home, for, though I did not see it then, in a few months I should have been at the pukka war, and among people who understood my language or whose language I could understand; people who observed the convenances of life, and within reasonable chance of leave.

But here, we had renounced our homes, we were cut off even from South Africa. Feeding, sleeping, working, we led the lives of the natives, with a thin veneer of European culture overspread. German East Africa, yes, it is fit only for a native or a Hun. I was miserable all the time I was there; yet it was here that I lived more, experienced more and even appreciated more than I have ever before done in so short a time.³

Many who served in Africa felt that they had actually fought the harder campaign. There is strong evidence for this. Though far fewer fought, there was nearly 100 percent casualties. Though the majority of these casualties were from disease, and non-combat related, still they could be

³ Nichols, written in diary 5/28/1918.

as deadly and as persisting as any battlefield injury. On the subject of comparing the two campaigns, Covell writes: "After the war was over I think there was a feeling that we who had been in the African operations had had a comparatively easy war, compared to those in the European theatres. No comparison is possible but I cannot help feeling that we in Africa had the tougher time. These in Europe had many amenities that did not come our way. Leave home, good food, good medical attention, less sickness."⁴ Perhaps the most important amenity lacking in East Africa was leave. Once you were in Africa you did not leave unless you were on a hospital ship. George Wilby, an ambulance driver, came to East Africa in 1916 and did not return to England until 1919.

Despite East Africa's hardships there actually were a few who claimed they enjoyed the experience. One of Campbell's friends, Thompson, upon hearing the war was over went on at lengths about the joys of army life.

"What?" retorted the philosophical Thompson. "Home? -- All over! -- Good gracious! What do you fellows want? I'm in no hurry! Why, I was never so well off in all my life! Think of it -- no business worries; no bills; no rent; no income tax; all food provided free and cooked for you; special times to get up in the morning and special times to go to bed at night; the use of a motor car for nothing, with petrol and tyres for free; if it goes wrong, bung it in the workshop and get another! And mark you (with emphasis) a Cook's Tour, personally conducted, free of all expense! What more *do* you want? And, mind you, during all the time, *paid for!*"⁵

⁴ Covell, p. 25.

⁵ Campbell, p. 184.

"Cook's Tour," of course, refers to the famous travel company Thomas Cook. Certainly it did seem as if the motor lorry drivers had the best experiences of any soldier in East Africa. However, Campbell's lasting impression of Africa is not so paradisiacal.

Distressed and depressed beyond measure, we felt that death and ugliness lurked everywhere. It was in the air we breathed, the water we drank, the sun that warmed our bodies; it crawled on the ground, dripped heavily from the rain-sodden trees, hung suspended in the humid, reeking atmosphere. Every living thing went in fear of its life, or turned upon another in self-preservation. Human life itself was an embodiment of ignorance and suspicion. It permeated our very soul, turned bright thoughts into dark, and made one long for the fate that he feared. At Mingoya the natives were being buried, six at a time, in common pits. The notes of a bugle sounding the Last Post punctuated beating hearts, as some of our own fellows were put to their final rest.⁶

Perhaps in time Campbell would come to love his African experience and long to revisit its "humid, reeking atmosphere." Years later Rowland came to miss it and longed to return.

"The occasional attacks of fever, which alarmed my parents and perplexed our doctor, served to set my mind wandering – I missed the hot sun and, contrary to the thought which came to me in the "Dongola" when steaming up the East African coast on my homeward journey, that I never wanted to see the place again, I now longed to revisit many of the African places which I had liked, meet again the friends, both white and coloured, I had known there, and bask again in the sun and warmth."⁷

⁶ Campbell, p. 125.

⁷ Rowland, p. 138.

Oddly, it was the pain of Rowland's experience that brought back the joys. Unlike the Western Front, the memories of war in Africa seemed to mellow with age. Perhaps, as Wynne Wynn suggests, that was the magical effect of Africa, that even in war and death something beautiful would survive.

Africa has a way of making generous amends for whatever sufferings she may inflict. Once admitted to communion with her own elusive spirit, men are for ever subject to a gently pulling at the heart. This inspite of countless cruelties, burning fevers, and a host of subtle poisons that assail soul as well as body. Evils are eclipsed by her beauty, her surprises, her contrasts, her unending movement. Like the sea, she is never still. No skies can be compared with hers. The complexion of her face is a merry dance of greens and blues and browns. Her voice is an eternal symphony. No ear that has heard and learned to love that voice is ever free of haunting echoes.⁸

⁸ Wynn, p. 19.

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